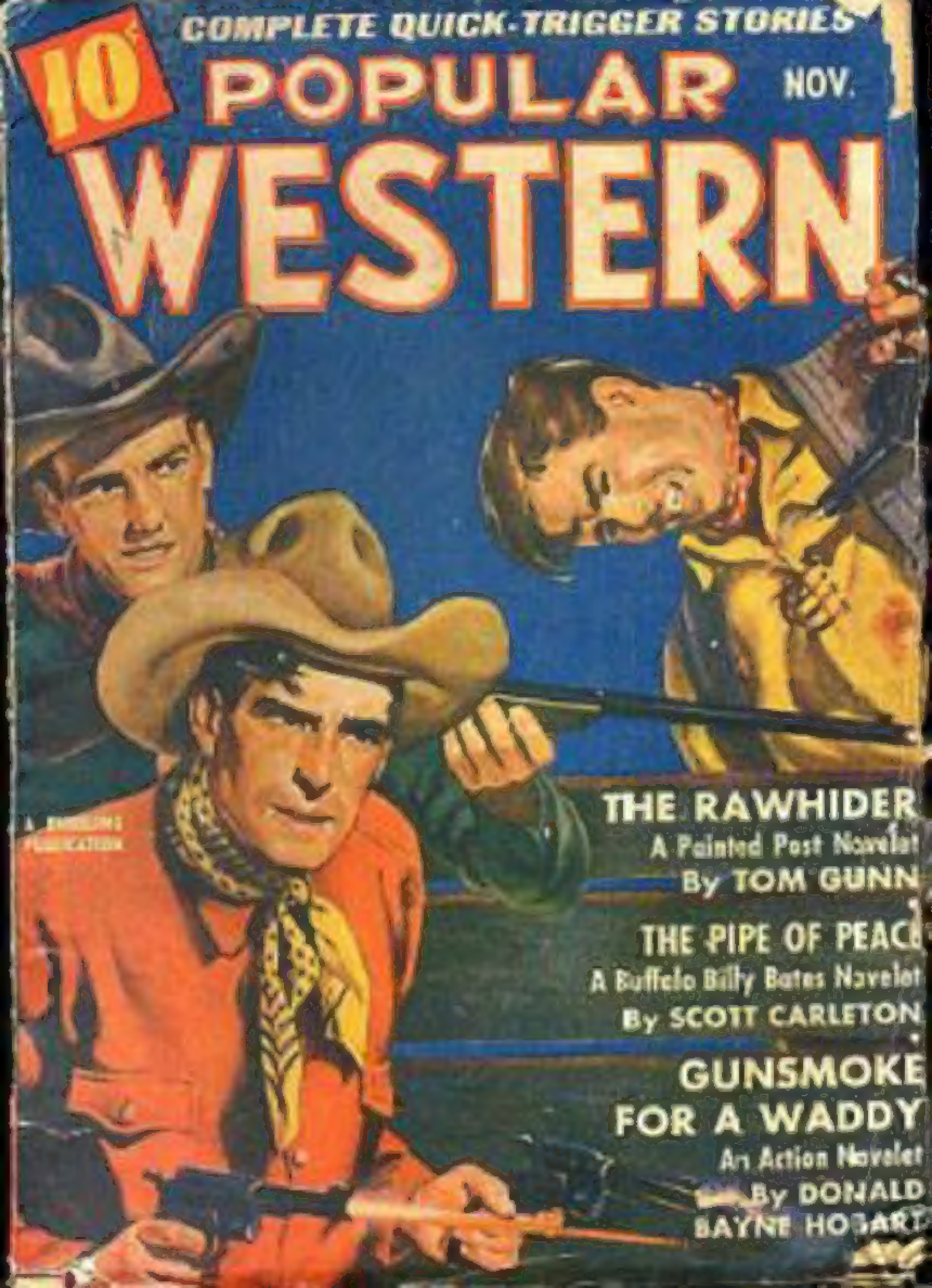
COMPLETE QUICK-TRIGGER STORIES

10 POPULAR WESTERN

NOV.



THE RAWHIDER
A Painted Post Novelet
By TOM GUNN

THE PIPE OF PEACE
A Buffalo Billy Bates Novelet
By SCOTT CARLETON

GUNSMOKE FOR A WADDY
An Action Novelet
By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

This is a place holder for **page 2**

….the advertisement behind the front cover

Speed Your Way to Success by specialized Home Study

So you dropped out of school too soon? Well, *cheer up!* Ask any representative group of Executives, Engineers or Educators and most of them will tell you: "*You CAN make good through specialized home study . . . IF you will make the effort and STICK to your course.*" In fact, you'll find that a number of important men in nearly every locality are former home study students themselves. They KNOW and have PROVED that *home study pays.*

In 40 years, home study has become an integral part of "the American way" . . . a nationwide educational system especially geared to the needs of wage earners. Today, there are far more home study schools than you perhaps realize—and you may place confidence in the courses of the American School, established over 40 years ago to bring you the advantages of advanced education.

Courses complete in themselves and include basic subjects essential to proper understanding of more advanced portions.

Catalogs and bulletins sent FREE.

COMMERCE and Industry are tough taskmasters today—but they are *just.* The penalties of failure may be heavy—but the rewards of success are rich. If you persist in doing work that *anyone* else can do—if you carelessly leave yourself open to competition with Machinery that sooner or later may do all the "unthinking" jobs . . . the repetitive tasks—you are slated for final disappointment and bitterness.

To win out, today, you must THINK. You must think *ON* the job and AWAY from it and, *most important,* you must think AHEAD of it. And that takes study.

Join this "Promotion Parade" of Progress-Minded Men and Women

Of the approximately 2,000,000 men and women enrolled for further education in universities, colleges, institutes of technology and home study institutions, about 37½%—or 750,000—have chosen *home study* as most practical for their purposes. They want to win Success. *You do, too!* They have FAITH in themselves. Do you believe in *yourself?* They have investigated *home study*—decided that it offers them their way "out and up" . . . *out* of the low pay, periodically unemployed rank and file . . . *up* into well paid positions where they enjoy prosperity, security and respect.

Get the facts, yourself. On coupon, check the line of work that MOST interests you . . . mail it PROMPTLY for information and complete details of this offer.

NO OBLIGATION. Address your inquiry, TODAY, to

AMERICAN SCHOOL
Dept. G758, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

Instruction material and methods simplify and speed up learning.
Tuition fees moderate and fair.
This seal protects you!
Success through Home Training

Mark, Clip and Mail This Coupon NOW

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. G758, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

Without obligation, Please send FREE and postpaid, bulletin and details of the Subjects checked.

- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Elec. & Gas Refrigeration
- ☐ Architecture and Building
- ☐ Plumbing and Steam Fitting
- ☐ Automotive Engineering
- ☐ Aviation Drafting
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- ☐ Business Management
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- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Retail Merchandising
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Practical Bookkeeping
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- ☐ Liberal Arts
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Shop Management
- ☐ Tool Making
- ☐ Better Foremanship
- ☐ Engine and Boiler Work

Name.....*Occupation*.....

Address.....*Age*.....

City.....*State*.....

Thousands Have Made Good through HOME STUDY

• EVERY STORY BRAND NEW •

POPULAR WESTERN

Vol. XXI, No. 3 — CONTENTS — November, 1941

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POPULAR WESTERN, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly, $.60; single copies, $.10. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter March 21, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1941, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. 173

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

I JUMPED MY PAY $35 A WEEK . . .

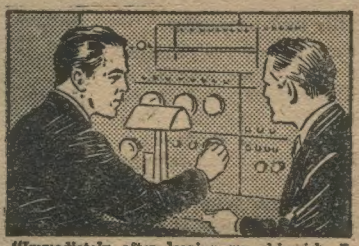
This Free Book Showed Me How

A True Story By J. C. V.
(Name and Address Sent on request)

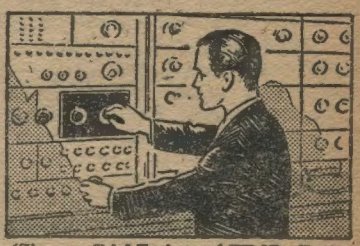
"I had a low-pay, no future job as a store clerk. I was not satisfied, but read about the opportunities in Radio and how N. R. I. would train me at home for them. I enrolled right away."

"The Course National Radio Institute gave me was so practical that I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"After graduating I got a job as Radio Operator aboard ship, and was able to travel and see many parts of the world with all expenses paid, and a good salary besides."



"Immediately after leaving my ship job, I was made Chief Engineer of a small broadcasting station. Later I held the same job with several other similar stations in the South."



"I'm now Chief Engineer of WDOD, Chattanooga, Tenn. I make $1,800 a year more than when I started Radio. There are many opportunities for trained Radio Technicians today."

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

I Will Train You at Home In Spare Time

Many fellows who want better jobs are going to read these words—and do nothing about them. But a few, like J. C. V., who are MEN OF ACTION are going to say "SHOW ME HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO!" The rest of my story is for these men. The "do-nothings" can stop here.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is one of the country's busiest industries today. On top of a record demand for Radio sets and equipment for civilian use, the Radio industry is getting millions of dollars in defense orders. The 882 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are 50,197,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained.

Beginners Quickly Learn to Ea... $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

Mail the Coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained, so you can see what they are doing, earning. **MAIL THE COUPON** in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

J. E. SMITH, *President*,
Dept. IMO9, National Radio Institute,
Washington, D. C.

EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times a private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. **IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!**

GOOD FOR *Free* 64-PAGE BOOK

Mr. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. IMO9,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Send me the FREE 64-page book which helped J. C. V. jump his pay $35 a week. I want to know about Radio's opportunities. (No salesman will call—write plainly.)

Name ..... Age.....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

They Never Knew It Was SO EASY To Play

Thousands Learn Musical Instruments By Amazingly Simple Method

No Teacher, No Musical Knowledge Required. In a Short Time You Start Playing Real Tunes! 700,000 Now Enrolled

THINK of the fun YOU are missing! The popularity, friendship, good times! Why? Because you think it's *hard* to learn music. You have an idea that it's a slow, tedious task, with lots of boring drills and exercises.

That's not the twentieth-century way! Surely you've heard the news! How people all over the world have learned to play by a method so simple a child can understand it—so fascinating that it's like playing a game. Imagine! You learn without a teacher—in your spare time at home—at a cost of only a few cents a day! You learn by the famous print-and-picture method—every position, every move before your eyes in big, clear illustrations. You CAN'T go wrong! And best of all, you start playing real tunes almost at once, from the very first lesson.

No needless, old-fashioned "scales" and exercises. No confused, perplexing study. You learn to play by playing. It's thrilling, exciting, inspiring! No wonder hundreds of thousands of people have taken up music this easy way. No wonder enthusiastic letters like those reproduced here pour in from all over the world.

Sound interesting? Well, just name the instrument you'd like to play and we'll prove you CAN! If interested, mail the coupon or write.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
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New York City

"Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hillbilly Songs." Craze for mountain music, "swing" and other popular forms has brought fame and fortune to many who started playing for the fun of it. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

Learned Quickly at Home. I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time. *H. C. S., Calif.

Send for FREE Booklet and Print and Picture Sample

See for yourself how this wonderful self-instruction method works. Sit down, in the privacy of your own home, with the interesting illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home." No salesman will call—decide for yourself whether you want to play this easy way. (Instruments supplied at discount when wanted, cash or credit.)

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Found Accordion Easy. "I've always wanted to play the piano accordion," writes *H. E. from Canada, "but thought I'd never learn it. Then I read about your lessons. I don't know how to express my satisfaction."

Plays on Radio. I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course. *W. H. S., Alabama.

Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional models

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
29411 Brunswick Bldg., New York City, N. Y.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument indicated below. Please send me your free booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home" and the free Print & Picture Sample.

Piano	Banjo	Flute
Violin	Mandolin	Piccolo
Guitar	Ukulele	Organ
Piano Accordion	Cornet	Drums and Traps
Plain Accordion	Trumpet	Modern Elementary Harmony
Saxophone	Harp	Voice Culture
Cello	Trombone	
Hawaiian Guitar		

Have You This Instru.?.....

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

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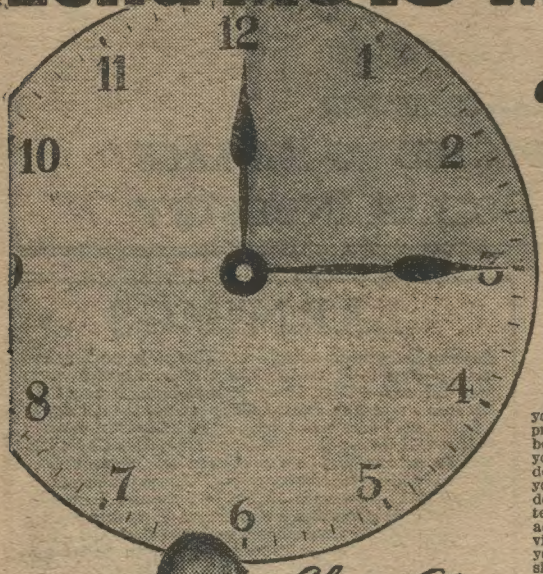
Lend Me 15 Minutes A Day

..and I'll prove I can make you a NEW MAN



I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them.

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that there's not even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

What 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Charles Atlas

America's Greatest "Builder of Men"

Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT. That name is Charles Atlas!

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

Here's PROOF Right Here!

"Results come so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them."
—W. L., Missouri

"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—A 2" GAIN IN 4 DAYS!"
—L. A. S., Illinois

"My doctor thinks your course is fine. In 15 days have put two inches on my chest and ½ inch on my neck."
—B. L., Oregon

"My muscles are bulging out and I feel like a new man. My chest measures 38 in., an increase of 5 in., and my neck increased 2 in."
—G. M., Ohio

FREE THIS FAMOUS BOOK THAT TELLS YOU JUST HOW TO GET A BODY THAT MEN RESPECT AND WOMEN ADMIRE

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It tells you exactly what "Dynamic Tension" can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. Results it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77-L, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 77-L,
115 East 23rd St., New York City

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

A Money-Making Opportunity

for Men of Character

EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISE FOR

AN INVENTION EXPECTED TO REPLACE A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR INDUSTRY

Costly Work Formerly "Sent Out" by Business Men Now Done by Themselves at a Fraction of the Expense

This is a call for men everywhere to handle exclusive agency for one of the most unique business inventions of the day.

Forty years ago the horse and buggy business was supreme—today almost extinct. Twenty years ago the phonograph industry ran into many millions—today practically a relic. Only a comparatively few foresighted men saw the fortunes ahead in the automobile and the radio. Yet irresistible waves of public buying swept these men to fortune, and sent the buggy and the phonograph into the discard. So are great successes made by men able to detect the shift in public favor from one industry to another.

Now another change is taking place. An old established industry—an integral and important part of the nation's structure—in which millions of dollars change hands every year—is in thousands of cases being replaced by a truly astonishing, simple invention which does the work better—more reliably—AND AT A COST OFTEN AS LOW AS 2% OF WHAT IS ORDINARILY PAID! It has not required very long for men who have taken over the rights to this valuable invention to do a remarkable business, and show earnings which in these times are almost unheard of for the average man.

EARNINGS

One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the *right* kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

Not a "Gadget"— Not a "Knick-Knack"—

But a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

Some of the Savings You Can Show

You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

Profits Typical of the Young, Growing Industry

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

This Business Has Nothing to Do With House to House Canvassing

Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

P. B. ARMSTRONG, President
Dept. 4047M, Mobile, Ala.

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Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

Name.....

Street or Route.....

Box No.....

City.....

State.....

Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. He became auditor for a large bank with an income 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income several times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which netted around $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training — you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.

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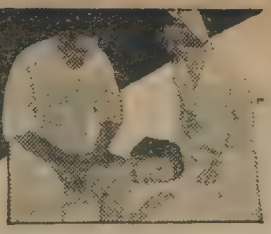

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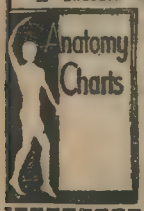

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Psychic Answer: Doubtful.
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Result: "Today I received word my allowance would be continued the rest of my life."

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Psychic Answer: Vibrations are good.
Result: "Have just received a $10 raise."

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Psychic Answer: The vibrations are favorable to make up.
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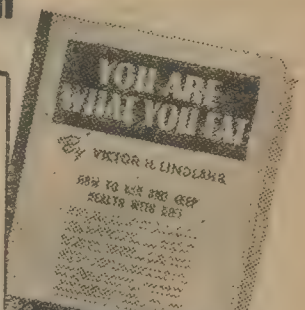

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CHAPTER I

Son of Shame

IT WAS bat-flying hour, in the soft dusk of an Arizona summer, when the tired, dusty rider pulled into Painted Post. Most of the town's small population was gathered in the saloon.

The slick-haired Thimble Jack was standing on his bar, lighting the hanging kerosene lamp, keeping one watchful eye on his opponent in an unfinished checker game. He burned his fingers and flipped the charred match to the floor.

"I seen yuh, Shorty Watts!" he howled. "Yuh took a move out of turn!"

At the corner table, Doc Crabtree and Judge John Bertram were starting their evening pinochle battle. Pacing the floor, Magpie Stevens, the gossipy, gap-toothed old stage driver, was talking to anybody who cared to listen.

"I passed the young squirt on the rimrock grade and I knowed right off who he was, though he barely nodded howdy. I knowed because old man McCall said he'd drifted in at the Box L this mornin' and asked for a job. But when he owned up to what his name was, McCall told him to clear out. Yuh can't blame old Mac none. The feller, his name was—"

In the cushiony dust outside, nobody had heard the slow hoofbeats. Even the loose sidewalk planks had failed to give notice. Without warning the batwing doors swung open. There in the flickering light stood the man Magpie had been so frankly discussing. He had overheard. He proved it by finishing Magpie's broken-off sentence.

"The name," he announced in a flat, hopeless voice, "is Wickard—'Wallapi' Wickard."

If the young man had introduced himself as a red devil straight from perdition, it would have produced less

Wallapi clubbed down as Taggert slipped out a knife to stab Steele

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sensation. Thimble Jack half-tumbled off the bar. A checker Deputy Shorty Watts was holding to crown a king dropped and rolled noisily. Doc Crabtree flashed alarm from behind his thick, shiny glasses. Judge Bertram whirled in his chair.

"Spawn of 'Wagonwheel' Wickard, huh?" he roared.

THE newcomer stood stiffly erect, like a man refusing to yield to a blow. He seemed to be debating the wisdom of an answer, any answer. The level brim of a flat black hat shadowed his eyes. Its rawhide chin thong seemed to be keeping his grim mouth closed. In the face of such a reception, to turn and go would have been the course of a proud man, or a coward.

"Yuh're Bertram, I take it," he said at last, "owner of the T Bar T."

"Judge Bertram," corrected Shorty crisply. "And the leadin' citizen of Indian County."

"I been told yuh're a fair-minded man, Judge," continued young Wickard tonelessly.

He pushed back his hat and hooked his thumbs in his gun-belt.

They could see his eyes now, blue and over-bright. Feverish-looking spots of color glowed on his smooth cheeks. He was a good-looking youngster and his soft buckskin jacket seemed to fit his braced shoulders snugly.

Bertram's heavy hands gripped the arms of his chair. He thrust forward his square, heavy-jowled jaw belligerently.

"Slick talk won't help none," he growled. "You ain't welcome here, Wickard."

There was just a bare suggestion of a despairing shrug in the set shoulders. Deputy Shorty Watts, usually sympathetic to any underdog, added gratingly:

"We're sort of choosey in this bailiwick, Wallapi. And my boss, the sheriff, keeps a close check on stray culls that aim to inflict us with their presence. My advice—"

"It's Sheriff Blue Steele I come to get advice from," interrupted Wallapi Wickard.

"The jail office is jest a few jumps up the street. The sheriff, he—"

Steele was suddenly present. He had entered as soundlessly as the visitor.

"Private business, Wickard?" he asked.

Wallapi Wickard spun at the slow drawl. His blue eyes made a quick estimate of the famous sheriff of Painted Post.

Blue Steele was well named. His lean body was lithe, but his rugged face and the metallic glint of his gray eyes bore witness to an unbreakable spirit. His worn calfskin vest and the pair of white-butted Colts weighting his *buscadero* belt were not the equipment of any soft armchair sheriff.

"Not private, exactly," young Wickard finally replied. "Jest personal. I'd as soon these others hear."

"Reckon everybody in Arizona territory has heard about yore scalawag old man and you," Magpie jabbered. "If I was givin' the orders around here—"

"Here's an order yuh can pack across the street to Chow Now," Steele broke in coolly. "Tell him to put a steak on the fire, a good thick one."

"B-but we all jest ate!" sputtered Shorty.

"Wickard hasn't. Chase along, Magpie. Yuh can trot right back if yuh're afraid of missin' somethin'."

"I ain't nobody's errand boy!" the old stage driver grumbled. "Let yore redhead deputy here do it."

"What Wickard says I want the *segundo* to hear," Steele said with finality. "All right, come on and talk up, Wickard."

The young man was vaguely surprised.

"It's the first time anybody invited me to give my side of the ruckus. And

they never give my dad a chance to tell it a-tall."

"I suppose he never cleaned out the Allison family!" snorted Bertram. "And mebbe it was jest a accident when he murdered that Tucson judge with his own gavel!"

WALLAPI WICKARD stood with his back to the bar, at bay against his accusers.

"It wasn't no accident, either, that my ma died from what the Allison

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

tribe done to us," he said quietly. "But my dad, he never handed Allison's wife and baby over to the Apaches, like folks claim. It was the other way around. He give his life protectin' that woman and her young one."

"Thunderation!" bellowed Bertram. "Everybody in the Territory knows yore old man was hanged."

"He was dyin' from Apache arrows when they strung him up."

"Let's have it all," said Steele. "Tell it from the beginnin'."

Wallapi Wickard kept his voice level, but there was terrific effort behind his restraint. He had hardly started the tragic account before his hearers were tensely aware of that.

"We come out from Texas, Dad, Ma and me. That was two years back. We was wagon folks, headin' for Tonto Basin, which we'd been told was good cattle country. I reckon our mistake was lettin' our intentions be known. The band of breeders we herded that far was stolen two days out of Gila Crossin'."

"Injuns," grunted Bertram

"We all figgered thataway ourownselves," the young man agreed gently. "Then, about a month later, we follered the Salt up under the Tonto Rim. We come on one of our cows, grazin' with a bunch that wore the Allison brand. It was then that Dad done some inquirin' at Mormon Flats. He was told that the Allison spread was about three days' travel farther on.

"It was mighty rough country. We got as far as a wagon could travel, then unhooked the leaders, put 'em under saddle and started on a looksee. The hosses was shot from under us. When we got back to the wagon, somebody had stole the wheels."

Doc Crabtree tugged at his billygoat beard.

"We read all about that in the Tucson paper. It was also claimed at the trial that yore pop rustled Allison hosses."

"To take the place of the ones which they shot. After that Dad called on Jay Allison."

"And tortured him like a redskin fiend, from which ordeal he died!" exploded Bertram.

"The facts about that never come out, Judge. My Dad, he lit into Jay Allison bare-fisted, give him such a lickin' that Allison climbed a *sahuaro* cactus to get out of reach. He got pronged sort of bad with the stickers and was took with blood poison. We was hazin' together the cattle that Allison stole when we heard about that.

"There was Indian trouble that summer. Dad, he made for the Allison

ranch again, fixin' to get Missus Allison and the baby out of there. That was when a posse captured and took him down to Tucson for trial."

"A posse made up of Tonto ranchers that played in with Allison, who was a plain thief," said Steele.

Young Wickard gave him a quick, grateful look.

"No such favorin' circumstances was mentioned at the trial. And the Tucson judge, he was in cahoots with the Tonto bunch. That judge sentenced my Dad to hang for killin' Allison."

"At which time yore old man tore loose from the marshal," stormed Bertram, "brained Judge Lang with his own gavel and made a wild getaway on another stolen hoss!"

THE youngster shook his head sadly.

"I reckon the accounts didn't mention that Ma and me was alone and never did know what happened to Dad, till he showed up after his escape. On account of all we went through, she—she died. I was alone

with her when the end came. Dad, he'd set out again for the Allison spread, fixin' to rescue Allison's woman and kid. Everybody else in that country was too bent on gettin' *him* out of the way to care for *them.*

"He got to the Allison place in time to fight a skulkin' band of Apaches, which vamoosed when the second posse came. They let on as how afterward that Dad was there for no good purpose. He was never able to say different. They brought me his body. I—buried him alongside of Ma, which is the way they'da wished it."

Magpie had hurried back now, breathing hard.

"Since which time," he panted, "yuh been skyhootin' through southern Arizona, linin' up the various citizens that had anythin' to do with the hangin'!"

"Lynchin', it was. Dad, he never meant to kill that Judge Lang. He shore had reason to, though, on account of bein' denied all rights, legal and human. Yeah, I been on the roam since, but not huntin' trouble. I been huntin' a job, a chance to live it all down. I'm a cowhand, always have been, but my jobs don't last when folks find out who I am."

He ended with that. There was a thick silence for a long moment. Shorty broke it.

"Wallapi, it shore looks like the cards was stacked ag'in you and yore folks. But what I crave to know is why did yuh come clean down here to Painted Post to explain things? And what is the advice yuh claim yuh want from the sheriff?"

The blue eyes were haunted by memories. At the moment it seemed that Wallapi hadn't heard. Bertram's deep voice jolted him into awareness.

"Don't expect Blue Steele to go clearin' up this mess yuh created for yoreownself!"

Wickard turned his gaze on the sheriff's face.

"They claim yuh've cleaned more badmen out of Arizona than any other dozen lawmen, Sheriff," he said. "They also claim that in a lot of cases yuh prevent crime before it happens. Well, that's why I'm here. I'm at the end of my rope. If the folks of Arizona won't let me make an honest livin', as God is my witness, I'm turnin' outlaw! And the ruckus my Dad created won't be a drop in the bucket to what I'll do if and when I'm compelled to cut loose!"

CHAPTER II

A Bad Name

IT HAD been neither threat nor challenge. Young Wickard's voice had not changed as he reached the climax of his story. The quiet tone, however, actually had seemed to increase the intensity of his words.

Everyone in the Painted Post Saloon breathlessly awaited Sheriff Blue Steele's decision. That opinion concerned not only the destiny of Wallapi Wickard, but in it was wrapped the destiny, perhaps the lives of many other persons.

"Come on, Wick," the sheriff said. "I reckon that steak oughta be done to a frizzle by now."

They left together. The batwing doors had scarcely stopped swinging before everyone started talking all at once. Bertram's bullfrog rumble was the loudest. But Magpie, shrill and insistent, got first say-so past a wad of fine cut.

"Steele's usually the one to rawhide any pilgrim with a bad record. But now, gosh hang it, he's swallered Wickard's yarn—hook, line and sinker!"

"If his luck's so tough," Bertram declared huffily, "why don't he pull out of the Territory and go some place where he ain't known?"

"For the same reason," Doc Crabtree said dryly as he polished his glasses on a section of shirt tail, "that he didn't back out of here when yuh opened up on him. He ain't the quittin' breed. What his old man done proves that."

"Sort of admire him, Doc, huh?" inquired Thimble Jack.

"Rawhidin' him for what his old man done ain't justice," Doc said defensively.

"Like father, like son!" blustered Magpie. "Blood'll tell every time. He's got mustang in him, that younker has!"

Shorty tapped Magpie's skinny wishbone with an emphatic forefinger.

"Yuh're a loud-mouthed old bug-eater. If yuh pick on Wallapi, I'll wallop yuh one that'll push them homely whiskers clear through yore jaw!"

"Is that so?" sneered Magpie. "Well, let me show you somethin'!"

He beckoned everybody outside to young Wickard's horse, which drooped wearily at the hitch-rail.

"I seen it when I went over to order his royal grub," he fumed. "Look!"

He struck a match. Cupping it in both hands, he held it close to the animal's left hip for a revealing moment before a stray breeze snuffed it out.

"Now what does that add up to?" he croaked triumphantly.

"Good Godfrey!" exploded Bertram. "Allison's brand!"

"And here's somethin' else," Magpie continued, clambering spryly onto the platform sidewalk. "If this young squirt was wagon folks out of Texas only two years back, how come he's called Wallapi? It's the name of a Arizona Indian tribe."

Doc Crabtree gave his billygoat beard a fretful tug.

"Magpie's right there," he admitted. "The Wallapis—miscalled from Hualpai—don't even range in Tonto Basin. They live up Mojave County way."

"I reckon he can explain that," defended Shorty.

Young Wickard's tragic tale had touched the little deputy's quick sympathy. And being blindly loyal to Steele, he took his stand along the lines the sheriff had indicated.

"He's already explained how him and his dad come to lay ropes on Allison hosses," he argued. "Allison, he's dead. This hoss is rightfully Wallapi's."

"Yuh don't say so?" whooped Bertram. "Mebbe yuh don't know it yet, yuh red-eared runt, but I bought up

the Allison brand! I paid Jay Allison's widow a thumpin' good price for it and for all stock so branded. In other words, this here hoss is really mine!"

THEY straggled back into the Painted Post Saloon, where Steele and Wallapi Wickard presently returned. Bertram, scowling moodily, had been doing some thinking. He erased the scowl as the two entered, for the judge could be smooth when the occasion called for it.

"So it's a job yuh're after, is it?" he asked graciously.

Eagerness lighted young Wickard's face.

"There's no outfit I'd rather work for than yore T Bar T, Judge."

Bertram folded his hands across his bulging middle and tilted back his chair.

"Now that's plumb lucky," he crooned with a cat-and-canary expression on his square-jowled, raw-beef face. "I can use a good puncher. A experienced drover, that is. Like one that hazed a herd clean through from Texas."

Shorty saw what was coming.

"There's other jobs, Wallapi," he warned. "No need to jump at the first one offered."

Young Wickard ignored the warning.

"I'm yore man, Judge, and I'm mighty obliged," he exclaimed impulsively. "I won't argue about pay, and long hours don't faze me none."

"Yuh'll be pretty much on yore own."

"And you call yoreself a white man, Judge!" blazed Shorty.

Wallapi seemed to think that the little deputy was still against him, that he was trying to deprive him of this one opportunity to live down his bad name.

"I been on my own," he said heedlessly. "I like it thataway. Do we head for the T Bar T tonight, Judge?"

"Yore job ain't at the home spread, Wickard. That is, not until yuh return."

"If yuh send this feller, Wallapi, into Tonto Basin, I'm ridin' with him!" Shorty vowed rashly.

Then Steele spoke. It was plain that he had been onto Bertram's play from the start.

"Wick, here, has been tellin' me a few things about Tonto Basin and the inhabitants. I aim to make a personal look-see. Seems like a good time now."

Bertram's chair dropped from its reclining position against the wall. The legs banged on the floor. His folded hands parted and grabbed his knees.

"Thunderation!" he shouted. "What are you, Steele—lawman or a missionary?"

"Every good lawman," Steele told him pleasantly, "has got a little missionary in him. Judge, yuh hit the nail right on the head. There's some missionary work needed up in Tonto Basin."

Doc Crabtree cackled at Bertram's red-faced discomfiture. Thimble Jack hid a malicious grin by turning and pretending to smooth his neatly parted hair in the back mirror. Magpie disgustedly threw his chew out over the batwing doors and started to say something. He thought better of it as Shorty edged up beside him with a freckled fist cocked and ready.

"We head for the Tonto country at sunup," finished Steele. "C'mon, Wick, better corral yore hoss. You can spread your soogans in the jail office, if yuh can stand the *segundo's* snorin'."

He led the way outside. Wallapi and Shorty trooped after him, but at the doorway the little deputy paused to taunt:

"Don't worry, Judge, we'll round up them Allison cattle. They'll be on yore grass before summer."

Three days later, Steele, Shorty and Wallapi Wickard rode into a deep, twisty canyon that penetrated

a rugged wilderness one hundred miles north of Painted Post. The young Texan had proved himself a dependable trail companion. He was well mounted on a smoky dun that traveled well with the sheriff's sleek steel-dust gelding and Shorty's bright pinto.

"The whole thing was," he told them, "that new settlers wasn't welcome here, though there was water and grass for hundreds like us. Free range, miles of it."

"And Jay Allison stocked his part of it with free beef," declared Steele. "Mixed brands didn't matter. When he was ready to sell meat to the Army forts or the Indian agencies, he produced bills of sale that were stamped with the legal Territorial seal."

"How'd he manage that?" asked Shorty.

"Judge Lang had a finger in several different pies," Steele answered evasively. "Nothin' crooked was ever proved against him, but he owned a heap more property than a county judge's salary could pay for in fifty years."

"Funny thing," mused Shorty, "how some folks make the cattle business pay big. And others, like Judge Bertram, barely make a go of it."

"With Jay Allison and Judge Lang dead, the T Bar T tally might rise some," Steele said. "The way to prove that to the judge, however, is to herd back a few head of T Bar T cows. Savvy?"

"Hooray!" Shorty yipped delightedly. "The judge, he's a bull-headed old whooper, but when yuh prove he's wrong, he most always gives yuh credit. Yes, sir, I know Judge Bertram. Worked for him a long time. Reckon that's why I'm undersized. Got sort of pushed together from so many kicks in the pants and pats on the back. Why, once—"

Rounding a bend, they suddenly came face to face with four hard-faced riders who were moving toward them. One held a Winchester across the saddle in front of him, although the rifle scabbard against his right stirrup leather would have carried it more comfortably. The three others wore six-guns on well filled cartridge belts.

Steele kneed the gelding a little ahead. He reined up, granite-gray eyes revealing nothing.

"Seems we're sort of expected," he greeted casually, with an eye on the drawn rifle.

"We keep a pretty good lookout on whoever heads up over the rim," said the man with the rifle. "We're particular about pilgrims—any pilgrims."

Shorty rushed up.

"Are yuh callin' the sheriff of Painted Post a pilgrim, yuh ignoramus?" he demanded indignantly.

The man's eyes widened above his scraggly mask of dark beard. As he sat a double-rigged saddle, his thin, brown hand caressed the stock of the rifle. There was a row of notches in the underside of the stock.

"Yuh're Blue Steele?" he demanded, looking at the sheriff's badge.

"Steel and lead, they call us," Shorty replied glibly.

The other jerked a head toward young Wickard.

"Yore prisoner?"

WICKARD came in between Steele and Shorty.

"This man is Tom Taggert, Sheriff," he said. "He runs an iron jest west of the Allison ranch. Yuh can see it there on his critter's shoulder."

Steele had already seen and read the brand. The Double T resembled Bertram's T Bar T.

Taggert turned his horse a little, either to bring the brand into better view, or to stand the rifle muzzle toward the trio that faced him.

"Custom here in this country is to give a account of yoreself, Steele," he said bruskly.

Steele was rolling a smoke. Without lifting his eyes, he drawled:

"That's a right sensible custom, Taggert."

"So start accountin' for yoreownself," chipped in Shorty.

One of the men behind Taggert swore irascibly and moved up beside the sheriff.

"Let's talk plain!" he gritted. "Yuh're off yore reservation, Steele. What's yore business up here? And tell that redhead misfit to keep his yawp shut!"

Steele pulled the drawstrings of his tobacco sack shut with his teeth.

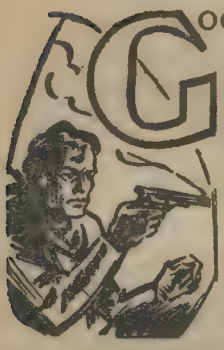
"Joe Gooch, he's criticizin' yore manners, *segundo,*" he said mildly.

"How do you know me?" the one called Gooch blurted out.

"Yore picture is in every single sheriff's files in the Territory, Joe. Along with other miscreants who happened to get a change of venue to Judge Lang's court whenever yuh happened to be brought up for trial anywhere."

CHAPTER III

Rustler Rule



GOOCH made a furtive movement with his right hand. It was checked in mid-air as Steele, returning the makings to side pocket of the calfskin vest, abruptly pronged a Colt across the swell-forks of his saddle.

"And you, Taggert, keep yore thumb off the hammer of that rifle," he said evenly. "Fact is, I'm askin' the redhead misfit to take it off yore hands."

Taggert seemed to swell.

"What right have you got—" he started to rant.

"The right and duty of all lawmen to disarm a known criminal, Taggert."

It was a bluff, but Taggert didn't call it. He gulped twice before he could speak again.

"We got our own sheriff up here, Steele."

"That's jest it. If he laid a hand on any one of yuh, out he'd go at the next election. I reckon yore sheriff, he'll appreciate a little outside assistance."

Taggert decided to change his tune.

"Look, Steele," he wheedled, handing over his rifle to Shorty reluctantly, "if yuh're goin' on what young Wickard says, yuh'll stir up more trouble than yuh can handle. We don't crave trouble. On the other hand, we—"

Whatever proposition he intended to make was left unuttered. Young Wickard cried.

"Quick, Shorty, give it to me!"

He plucked the rifle from the little deputy's hands, whipped it to his shoulder in a quick upward aim and fired. On a high-walled cliff, two hundred yards away, a gun dropped out of a catclaw clump, slid for a few feet, then fell into the canyon. It nearly buried itself in the sand off to the left.

Grimly Wallapi Wickard handed the smoking rifle back to Shorty.

"This," he said, "is where they shot our hosses. Lucky thing I recollected the bushwhacker's perch."

Tonto Basin gave the lie to the legend that Arizona was all desert. Sweeping northward, tufted by snow-crowned peaks, was a grassy timberland that reached to the Grand Canyon plateau. A land of abrupt climbs and descents, the climatic range was the greatest on the North American continent. This meant more than scenic magnificence. It gave all-year grass to range-wise stockmen.

To those of them who lived by flaunting the law, it offered natural sanctuary. Living in it were the bold and uncouth descendants of early trappers and others who, through necessity rather than preference, dwelt apart from government.

The pair that had ridden with Taggert and Gooch spurred away as Wallapi shot. Up-canyon and around the bend they fled. Steele knew that the task before him would be made easier if he dropped them, but they had given him no actual cause. They were young. They were evidently brothers, for Gooch snarled:

"The Shanleys, they'll take up where their paw left off. You won't never see Painted Post again, Steele!"

"Thanks for remindin' me what we come here for," Steele retorted dryly. "We aim to round up some homesick Indian County cows. Wick, Mister Gooch won't need that six-gun to help us."

JOE GOOCH swore roundly as Wallapi disarmed him. In his random cursing he spat out a fighting name. He addressed it to no one in particular, but it had no more than left his lips than Steele was out of saddle.

Steele meant no bravado. He intended to use Gooch, but first Gooch needed taming. So Steele unbuckled his *buscadero,* hung his Colts on his saddle-horn. He heeled his cigarette into sand and motioned Gooch to alight.

Burly, thick-necked and hot-tempered, Gooch was willing. He was on the ground and in the next instant they squared off.

Gooch swung first. He missed and followed up with a savage rush. Maneuvering for an opening, Steele warded off two blows, then closed in at Gooch's first pause. His right fist landed on the other's mouth.

Gooch spat blood, cursed mufflediy and rushed again. Another smash to the face staggered him. He crouched and grappled this time, and they went down in a tangle. This was Gooch's element. He used fists, elbows, knees and gouging spurs.

Shorty croaked alarm as the sheriff was borne flat by the heavier man. Taggert swung his horse out of their way, yet more than that was in his mind. Beside the gelding, he snatched a Colt. Shorty yelped again and dived from saddle. With an armlock he bore his man to the ground. The Colt blasted in the sand, a foot from Steele's head.

The shot, exploding so near, startled Gooch into a split-second of inaction. That gave Steele time enough to flip backward, toppling the big man. With one hand he got a twist-hold in the neckerchief. The other swung in a terrific half-circle and *cracked* on Gooch's jaw.

Steele crunched a boot on Gooch's kicking right leg and smashed again. The blow nearly jarred Gooch's head off his shoulders and this time it lolled back limply. His bloody mouth was half-open. Steele clipped him once more, to be certain, then dropped him.

Shorty was too busy to see Taggert

[*Turn page*]

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slip a double-edged Bowie knife from the inside of his belt. But Wallapi saw. He clubbed down with the rifle barrel. Taggert howled as the front sight gashed his knuckles. The knife dropped out of his hand.

Shorty was all over his man now. For all of his five-feet-two, he was packed with dynamite. Pounded from all sides but the top, Taggert slumped, dropped to a cringing squat. He groaned and put both hands to his face.

Steele was rolling another smoke. Wallapi sheathed the Bowie knife in his own belt, after scooping it up without alighting. Shorty caught up Taggert's and Gooch's shying horses. He booted Taggert to his feet.

"That was jest a little old appetizer," he stated. "The main course is comin'. Yuh're the sort of citizen Arizona can get along jest fine without."

"Not for awhile yet, *segundo,*" Steele said, lighting his smoke and buckling on his belt. "Taggert and Gooch are gonna help us do a quick roundup."

Wallapi kept a watchful eye on the ambush spot.

"Sorta wish we'd rounded up them two mavericks," he said. "They'll spread the news and there'll be ridge riders out."

Gooch sat up and rubbed his jaw dazedly. He tried cursing, but it hurt and he gave it up. He gave Steele a venomous scowl from one swollen eye.

"Ride and be hanged!" he mumbled. "I'm settin' right here!"

THE rifle went off in Wallapi's hands. Sand geysered between Gooch's spraddled knees. He popped to his feet without visible effort. Wallapi levered out the empty and aimed at Gooch's feet. No spoken order was needed. Gooch hit leather. Shorty tossed him his reins and flung a questioning look at Steele.

"We're headin' up-canyon abreast," Steele ordered. "And contrary to custom, Taggert and Gooch take to the outside, jest in case skulkers try pottin' us from the skyline. All right, *vayamos,* let's go!"

Five abreast they started, Wallapi in the middle, eyes scanning the ridges, Taggert's rifle in his hand.

"Two-three miles ahead, there's a long meadow," young Wickard said. "Some trees and a spring. It's beddin' ground for cattle. *Javelinas* in there, too. How about some wild hog meat, Sheriff?"

"Now that's the sorta talk I like," declared Shorty. "My stomach is shrunk up dry and hard as a mule's hoof."

"Good sort of stomach to travel on, *segundo,*" was Steele's uncomforting reply. "First we're gonna work that meadow for interestin' brands."

They approached the meadow across a white sage flat. Cattle sign was recent and abundant. Steele's keen, slitted eyes studied it, saw running hoof marks.

"The Shanley boys outsmarted us a little," he muttered. "They've hazed the beef out, skittered it back in the chaparral."

"Come evenin', they'll straggle back into water," offered Wallapi.

"In the meantime we can knock over a *javelina,*" Shorty enthused. "The local welcomin' committee here will be plumb tickled to butcher and barbecue it for us. Huh, Mister Taggert?"

Taggert screwed up his beaten face.

"Them musk hogs make me sick," he objected. "Takes a man a month to wear the smell off."

"Bet the musk hogs don't admire yore polecat aroma any better," remarked Shorty. "If I was—"

A .45 *cracked* from a green thicket that marked the spring. Gooch flopped flat in saddle. For a moment Steele thought he was hit. Then a second shot sent clamoring echoes and he felt the breath of a bullet.

He had a rope in the bit ring of Gooch's horse. On the other side,

Shorty's macarty tethered Taggert's mount. In quick unison they acted, swinging their captives between them and the spring. That stopped the gunfire.

"If the Shanley boys only had their paw's long gun!" blurted Taggert.

"Make for the trees and shield yoreselves careful!" Steele crackled.

He swung from the knotted group, sent the gelding in a daring dash for the east slope. There was a litter of huge boulders there. He made it, though two more shots moved the sage perilously close to the gelding's flying legs.

"Looks like we'll have smoked Shanley instead of barbecued *javelina,*" grieved Shorty.

He and Wallapi swung for the trees. Wallapi, in charge of Gooch now, jabbed the rifle in his ribs and made him sit erect.

The gelding, riderless now, pawed restlessly behind a massive rampart of dark rock, beside which it blended almost to invisibility. Steele was snaking toward the spring.

SHORTY found cover among the low-branched live oaks. He was kind of fidgety.

"The sheriff, he gets too reckless," he fretted. "He shore overworks his luck. I don't like this a-tall."

The demoralizing speed of such tactics rarely failed, though. Steele's apparent lack of caution got prompt results once again. The *blam blam* of double-triggering, the wordless cry of a stricken man and then the quick beat of hoofs betrayed the fact that the surviving Shanley was on the run.

Steele's Colts spoke twice more. A guttural bawl drifted back, but the hoofbeats didn't falter.

"Winged him!" yelped Shorty, his innumerable freckles standing out like bright, new pennies on his sweat-shiny face.

Wallapi's blue eyes were starry with hero worship.

"No wonder he's famous! Must take everlastin' practice to swing two guns thataway!"

"It can't be learned," Shorty declared. "I've tried. Has to come natural to a man, same as likin' limburger."

Something crashed toward them, brought the rifle butt to Wallapi's shoulder. With terrified grunts, the object broke into the open thirty yards away. Wallapi fired. The long-tusked boar over-ended in a billow of dust.

In the next moment Steele appeared and the young man flushed with humiliation.

"Reckon that was a fool play," he said contritely.

A smile flicked Steele's lips.

"You boys shore got wild hog meat on your minds. How'll pit barbecue beef do instead?"

"Yuh mean slaughter a cow?" cried Shorty.

"That preliminary's been taken care of. Looks like our *companeros* here had a camp up by the spring and was fixin' to stay a spell."

Gooch swore. "Wish we'd put coyote poison in that yearlin'!"

Shorty tossed the macarty end that held Taggert to Wallapi. He sent the pinto toward the shot *javelina,* unlopping his lariat as he went.

"Got a idea how we can make use of this critter, Sheriff!" he chirped brightly.

He dragged the carcass to the spring camp, following the others. There, when Taggert and Gooch were ordered from saddle, he revealed his ingenious plan.

It was the work of only a few moments to jab slits back of the ham tendons with Taggert's Bowie knife. Then they ran the captives' belts through those slits, one to each leg, and buckled the belts back around the prisoners' middles.

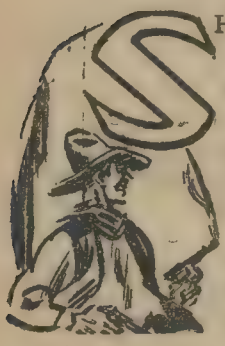
"That fixes it so's we won't have to watch you boys so close while we eat." The little deputy beamed, standing back and admiring his handiwork.

"Not much chance of a getaway with both of yuh harnessed up to a dead hog."

They uncovered the hot, steam-tendered feast and banqueted hugely. When they finished, they buried the dead Shanley in the cooling barbecue pit which his own hands had helped to dig.

CHAPTER IV

Skyline Skulkers



SHADOWS filled the canyon. What alarms the night would produce depended on whether the wounded Shanley clung to saddle long enough to spread the warning of the law's raid.

"Gettin' our evidence and hightailin' back is what we gotta do now," Steele instructed. "Back in Painted Post, we can pry outa Taggert and Gooch the facts we need to clean up Tonto Basin."

"You ain't takin' us nowhere!" blazed Gooch. "We'll stay anchored to this blasted hog first!"

Taggert wasn't so determined. He was the color of soft soap, for the boar was unpleasantly musky. Taggert plucked pleadingly at his belt buckle. Steele produced a small coil of wire from his saddle-bags.

"Don't make me go into painful details, you hombres," he said. "That *javelina* is starting to draw flies already. Do yuh crave to be Siamese twins with it permanent?"

"Gory, that's a fine way to hurry 'em along to the Painted Post lockup!" exulted Shorty. "They'll cover a hundred miles in record time, before the critter swells and blows up!"

"No!" begged the sick Taggert. "No!"

Gooch kicked him viciously in the leg.

"Quit blubberin'!" he gritted. "There's still time!"

His meaning became ominously evident soon after. On a western ridge, a horse and rider were briefly outlined against a red sunset.

"That's not Shanley," declared Wallapi.

"And it's a safe bet that whoever it is, he ain't alone," added Steele. "Come dark, there'll be a general swoopin' down."

Wallapi was gravely putting Taggert's rifle scabbard onto his own saddle.

"Sheriff," he finally said, "there ain't nothin' to hold you and Shorty, once yuh get the evidence yuh want. With me, it's different."

"How so?" demanded Shorty.

"I'm workin' for Judge Bertram. He hired me to bring down the Allison herd, so I'm ridin' on."

"Don't be loco!" objected the little deputy. "The judge, he never expected yuh to tackle no such job. He jest offered it to rawhide yuh. Besides which, I ain't none too sure he bought up the Allison brand. Are you, Sheriff?"

"It ain't the judge's style to lie in such a matter, *segundo*, though it's odd he hadn't mentioned it before."

Taggert squawked dismally as Steele stooped to wire his belt buckle, shackling him to the smelly *javelina* beyond hope of escape.

"Now hold on, Sheriff!" he babbled. "If I give yuh some important information, will yuh do the right thing?"

"Such as turnin' yuh loose to maraud some more?"

"Let me go and I give yuh my word I'll clear outa Arizona for good."

"Yuh'll have to," growled Gooch, "yuh doublecrossin' sidewinder!"

"I can't guarantee yore freedom, Taggert," Steele parried. "That's Judge Bertram's say-so, not mine. But if yuh do get it, I promise that Gooch won't hinder yore getaway."

Taggert thought it over silently. "I'll take the chance," he finally de-

cided. "When Bertram hears what I know, I reckon he'll be sorta grateful. Here it is. The beef grazin' hereabouts is what's left of the Allison herd, though not one single head carries his brand." He paused to grin wanly. "Bertram'll be right surprised to know he bought back a bunch of his own cattle."

Shorty cackled gleefully. Steele concealed whatever amusement he felt.

"How about your Two T brand?"

"That's the way we worked it. I got the T Bar T stuff, botched some of the brands with a runnin' iron so's they might be took for Two T, then turned 'em over to Allison. Savvy?"

"How about Gooch here? Was he in on any such deals?"

Taggert flicked a side glance at the man squatting beside him.

"He can talk for hisself. All I ask is, keep us apart. I wouldn't of give in to nobody but you, Steele. I done it because yuh're a squareshooter and keep yore word. Also, I figger the easy days here in Tonto Basin is about over."

"You're a smart crook, Taggert," Steele said tersely. Then he faced Wallapi. "This makes yore job easy, Wick. You agreed to bring the cattle carryin' the Allison brand. This hombre kindly informs us there ain't any such. Looks like the joke's on the judge."

Shorty's mischievous amusement was loud and prolonged. He laughed until he was weak and grabbed his sides as he reeled for the pinto.

"Can't hardly wait till we get back to the judge and rub this into his ornery hide!"

But his fun ended abruptly. A bullet *spat* into the sod close to his feet. A report echoed along the canyon walls. A second shot came before the tumult of the first one died and a slug plunked into the dead *javelina*.

Gooch yowled and struggled.

"That's the worst shootin' I ever seen!" he panted. "Or mebbe it wasn't no accident a-tall. They'd as soon drill us as—" He switched abruptly to craven surrender. "Get us away from here, Steele, sudden, before they murder us!"

With two swift slashes, Steele hamstrung the dead *javelina*. Wallapi had the horses. Gooch and Taggert mounted nimbly. They fought down the canyon with their captors close-bunched with them. Dusk interfered with the aim of riflemen on the ridge, but bullets furrowed the sand uncomfortably close all around them.

"They're fixin' to shut us up and save their own miserable hides!" Gooch howled. "Jest for that—"

He was ready to talk, but there was no time for it. On ahead, riding madly down a slide rock chute, came a ragged line of riders. They spread out across the canyon to shut off this one avenue of escape left to Wallapi, the lawmen, and their prisoners.

The lives of the little band depended now on Steele's strategy. The trick of shielding Shorty, Wallapi and himself with their prisoners was of no further use. For one thing, the fading daylight made accurate aim impossible. In the deepening gloom, friend and enemy looked alike to their attackers. It was further probable that Gooch had hit on the uncomfortable truth—that the ruthless rim riders would willingly sacrifice him and Taggert, rather than risk exposure.

"WE'RE in a jackpot, Sheriff!" breathed Shorty as he loosened a few belt cartridges. "I'm shore glad we ate while I was still hungry."

Steele motioned them all to a halt in a seep where catclaw and creosote bush screened them from ahead.

"The first thing is, don't let yore hopes rise, none, Taggert and Gooch. We're takin' yuh through to Painted Post, or else yuh meet yore finish here with us."

"There's a way past," Taggert

croaked, "though I ain't shore the hosses can make it."

"Where?"

"The way they come down. There's a trail on the ridge. It leads on down past the lookout, till it hits a side draw."

"Where we'd find a flock of 'em waitin' for us. That won't do, Taggert. We've got to coax 'em up here past us."

"How?" yapped Shorty. "What'll we use for bait?"

Steele reached for the rifle beside Wallapi's leg. He gave crisp orders in a low, guarded voice.

"In a little while they'll hear guns a mile or so back up-canyon. They'll figger we're tangled with a drag bunch, closin' in as we head out thataway. Chances are, they'll decoy right past yuh here."

"And then?" Shorty demanded.

"Soon as they're past, hit for the open country, you and Wick and these *lobos*. Better gag 'em good and tight, so they don't holler out any warnin'."

"Yuh mean for us to light out and leave yuh back there, Sheriff, to tangle with 'em alone?" objected Shorty. "No, sirree! I ain't—"

"I say draw lots to decide who goes back," proposed young Wickard. "Or else let me go. Dyin' here, where my folks met their end, that'd be fittin' for me."

He reached for the rifle, but Steele had already slithered off and was quickly swallowed in the shadows. With him went all of Shorty's gay banter.

The little deputy fought back an almost ungovernable impulse to spur out after the man who was his idol and ideal. He gulped down an aching lump in his throat. It long had been his devout wish that, when their time came, they would face the Great Beyond together. He whipped off his neckerchief and lopped it over Gooch's head.

"I shore wish yuh'd put up a struggle!" he hissed in Gooch's ear. "I crave to bat the top of yore head down even with yore ears!"

He jerked and knotted the kerchief tightly and Gooch winced as the twisted bandanna thrust his bruised mouth open. Wallapi did the same with Taggert.

"What I don't like about this," sighed Shorty, "is that the sheriff might run into a flock of skulkers back yonder."

It was a torturing wait. Twilight turned to dense darkness. The stars blinked on until the heavens were bright, but their weak glow did not penetrate the gloomy canyon depths.

At last, shattering the sinister silence, the rifle's thin, sharp *crack* awoke the slumbering echoes. It was followed by the double *pound* of a Colt. Then the rifle again and more Colt talk. It sounded like a deadly duel.

Hardly daring to breathe, hugging the fringing thicket, Shorty and Wallapi waited.

It came at last, slow and guarded, the crunch of hoofs in dry canyon sand. The tip of Wallapi's Bowie knife was in the small of Taggert's back. Shorty held the chilly muzzle of his .45 on Gooch's neck.

They watched seven riders slither past like phantoms.

CHAPTER V

Fools' Fury

THEY breathed again as they emerged from the canyon, where the stars spanned the wide sky and open country stretched southward from the looming Tonto Rim.

Shorty reined up, swung from saddle and dropped his reins. He slumped on the ground, head propped on one elbow. His

bright spirit had turned to ash. Gone was his old worshipful appreciation of the night's splendor, such as when he and Steele faced dark adventure together. With Wallapi there was no comradely laugh and merry jibe that dispelled hardship and danger on other nights.

The little deputy was still, but not in repose. Worry churned in him. Where was Steele now? Would his coup succeed? How could he eel through seven riders, spread fanwise across the open canyon?

It was a tribute to Wallapi Wickard that he understood and respected Shorty's mood. He, too, in the little while he had known Steele, had come to share that fierce loyalty.

Finally Shorty was unable to endure the suspense any longer. He got up and aimed at the north star, lammed it with three signaling shots. Out here on the open plain, it seemed that the .45 *popped* in puny fashion. Would the reports carry up into the canyon and guide Steele to this rendezvous?

Shorty and Wallapi, and the two captives as well, were bewildered a few seconds later by an answer that drifted up from the south. There was a double *bang,* in the measured beat of Steele's twin Colts. Then a third stab of gun sound followed at a close interval.

"Migosh, how could he have got around us?" yawped Shorty.

"Are yuh shore—" Wallapi started to ask.

"That wasn't Steele," Gooch said with savage satisfaction. "Steele, he's done for."

"I wonder!" groaned Shorty.

He sprang back on the pinto, not knowing whether to leave the spot. But the puzzle solved itself mercifully soon. They heard the clatter of horses, crowded into a run, then a lusty, booming hail.

"Hiya, Sheriff!" came a familiar, deep shout.

Out of the darkness two horsemen took form and substance. Shorty shrilled at them and all at once they were together.

Bertram packed his sawed-off shotgun. Doc Crabtree, saddle-weary and irritable, unpried himself from his mount and tenderly kneaded his thighs. He peered through his glasses at Gooch and Taggert.

"Where's Steele?" he demanded.

Shorty was deprived of an answer. Gun sound raged abruptly up in the canyon. Mingled in it was that now unmistakable *slam bang* of the sheriff's Colts.

"Good Godfrey!" bellowed Bertram. "Yuh left him up there lone-handed, settin' out here like billy owls?"

"It's yore fault, the fix he's in!" wailed Shorty. "It was you that cooked up the excuse to send us."

JUDGE BERTRAM was as anguished as the little deputy.

"Thunderation, this sprig Wickard was the one I— Well, anyhow—"

"Why don't yuh tell 'em yore conscience got the best of yuh, yuh old sinner?" snapped Doc Crabtree. "Why don't yuh say yuh regretted what yuh done and then dragged me into this danged fool chase after 'em?"

"If yuh was so bent on a rescue, Judge," Shorty crackled, "yuh shore got yore chance now! Doc, you got a gun?"

"Think I'd prowl around in this howlin' wilderness without one?" Crabtree snorted.

He dragged out a derringer. It was almost lost in the palm of his pale, delicate hand.

"Huh, that wouldn't even tear a hole in a tough hombre's shirt. Why in all get-out didn't yuh bring something bigger'n a pea-shooter?"

"I'm fagged from packin' this," Crabtree snapped.

Wallapi flashed the Bowie knife from his pants' band.

"Here's a tool a sawbones should

savvy," he said. "If either of these patients show restless symptoms, operate on 'em."

He bent down and thrust the knife hilt-first at Doc, who gingerly accepted it.

"Yuh mean these specimens is prisoners and that I'm their temporary keeper?"

"Permanent!" gritted Shorty. "That is, if we don't come back. C'mon, Wallapi. C'mon, Judge."

They tore off. Bertram had come far and fast. His horse was jaded, but he didn't spare it. He was an old war-horse himself. Now was not the time to spare man or beast.

The shooting had trickled to irregular single reports. That was encouraging.

"The sheriff, he's still fightin' back!" sang out Shorty. "Gosh, if the stars jest stand still and delay a few ticks of eternity, we'll get to him in time!"

They were in the thick of it before they knew it. The attack came from the right, where Bertram rode. Close to him, so close that it almost scorched his ruddy face, a rifle blazed. His horse reared. His hat whirled off. He swung the sawed-off toward a shallow gully where the rifle had spurted. The instant it jolted two streaks of black powder flame, there was a blubbering cry.

"I got him!" thundered Bertram, fishing in a pocket for reloads.

A rider swept at him from behind, with six-gun poised for a pointblank shot. Shorty was ahead now, but Wallapi had wheeled. He came through a cluster of catclaw that barbed his horse—breast, shoulder and flank. He gripped his revolver, but the attacker was in line with the judge, who had whirled, cramming new shells into the breech of the sawed-off.

Wallapi kicked out of stirrups. He gathered his legs under him and with the agility of a young saddle-reared *Tejicano*, he made a springboard of his saddle.

It proved that the son of Wagon-wheel Wickard had spoken no idle boast when he said the ruckus his dad had created was nothing. He tackled the gun-arm in mid-air. The gun barked and the attacker let out a distressed cry as he was whisked off his horse. Wallapi's legs were wound around him like strangleweed when he hit the sand head-first with a sickening *snap* and *crunch*.

WALLAPI was up, befuddled only for a second. He sprang back to his own horse with a gun in each hand. Now for his first try at double-gunning.

Bertram snapped shut the breech of the old sawed-off.

"Son, yuh got a lifetime job on the T Bar T!" he boomed.

They raced ahead, where Shorty had roused fiery hornets and was screeching blue murder. A man jumped out of the path of the charging pinto, facing it. He and Shorty shot in perfect unison. Whether or not he hit the man, Shorty didn't pause to learn. It was enough that he himself was not hurt. He rode over the outlaw, dashing him flat.

The hootowl came up, grunting hoarse, hurt sounds and aimed at the vanishing Shorty. Bertram's old scatterspout polluted the night again and the man flopped on his face. At close range, buckshot was as deadly as bullets.

"Good going, Boss!" cheered Wallapi.

"Yuh don't need to close-herd me, so get along!" yelled Bertram. "Rip into 'em, boy!"

Steele was making his stand in the small wedge of a blind wash in the canyon's side. Shorty was drawn toward him by some mysterious magnetism. The shooting was over now. Steele strode into view.

"Sheriff!" Shorty howled joyously. "The judge—"

"Nothin' under the sun can be mistook for that old pepper-shaker of

his," Steele interrupted. "I heard him a-comin'. So did the Tontooters. Only two are left and they bolted. We better leave 'em for seed."

He was getting the gelding into the open when Bertram got there. The judge was so thankful that he felt mushy inside. He wanted to leap down and embrace the cool, unflustered Steele. Instead he growled:

"Well, I see yuh bit off more'n yuh could chew, as usual."

"You bet, and he was chewin' it!" chattered Shorty happily. "What we oughta do now is go to work on you, Judge!"

"Go ahead and say it, Shorty," he invited. "But from then on, nobody's makin' light of my boss's name, not in my hearin'!"

"Aw, thunderation!" rumbled Bertram uncomfortably. "I knew I was buyin' a herd that didn't exist. I figgered Allison's widder needed the money."

"See?" young Wickard sang out triumphantly. "The judge, he was jest soft-hearted when he bought up the Allison brand! The reason he hadn't mentioned it was to conceal his charity, Sheriff!"

"Good Godfrey, will you quit raw-

Buffalo Billy Bates Meets the Apache Kid—Swaps Lead with Curly Bill—and Fights the Toughest Outlaw Outfit in the Hard-Bitten Town of Tombstone!

IN OLD ARIZONA

A Complete Action Novelet

By SCOTT CARLETON

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FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

He yelled to Wallapi, who was fine-combing every patch of cover. Steele was all at once gripped with an apprehension he never felt for his own safety.

"Taggert and Gooch, how about them?" he demanded.

Shorty grinned. "Unless Doc Crabtree is performin' a autopsy, they're still in shape to confess. Yuh'll be right surprised, Judge, when they talk up and tell who's the biggest sucker in Arizona Territory!"

Young Wallapi came. His dun was lathered and pawing from the sting of yucca thorns.

hidin' me!" blurted Bertram embarrassedly. "I'd a heap rather keep that hard-shelled reputation of mine uncracked. They say give a dog a bad name and—"

"Say, I been meanin' to bring this up," cut in Shorty, turning to young Wickard. "How come yuh're called Wallapi? Some Injun mixed in yore ancestry?"

"It was Walloper when I left Texas," the other stated simply. "Walloper Wickard. But out here in Arizona, they put a fancy twist on everythin'."

"Well, yuh're Wallapi from now

on," Judge Bertram declared positively, "because that's the way it's wrote on the T Bar T payroll checkbook. And I jest happened to think, I'm needin' a new foreman—"

Steele was twisting a cigarette shut. He didn't say anything, for his job was done. He had put young Wickard to the test and he was gratified by the results. From now on the name would be a respected one throughout Arizona Territory.

"Hognose" Hornby, Slated for a Yuma Prison Hangrope, Stages a Jailbreak at Painted Post in

OUTLAW RANCH

Another Complete Sheriff Blue Steele Novelet

By TOM GUNN

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Girls rave about the shaves you get
With thrifty, keen-edged Thin Gillette.
This blade skims off the toughest stubble—
Costs ten for four—saves time and trouble!
New kind of edges on steel hard enough to cut glass
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Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade
Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

When Brothers Are Men

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Author of "Star-Toter's Son," "Drygulcher," etc.

Fred's right hand came up and his gun thundered

The Rigdon Hellions Start a Fake Gold Rush—and Learn About Confidence Games from a Lady Cowpoke!

THE Rigdon boys were a pair of harum-scarum kids who'd had a hell-ripping good time ever since they'd come to live with their Uncle Hank Rigdon on his Cedar Flat ranch ten years ago. It was their habit to ride into Cowhorn on Saturday night and not only paint the town a particularly violent shade of red, but to pull its ears down so tight that they squeaked.

It was considered just plain good sense around Cowhorn not to start any trouble with the Rigdon brothers, and even the hard cases who hung

around Beauty Kling's place considered that a good principle. The Rigdon boys worked so hard at having a good time that they never gave much thought of settling down—that is, until Jane Collins came to Cowhorn.

No stranger would ever have sized the boys up as brothers. Albert was two years older than Alfred, and he had a pair of shoulders like a young mountain, a neck like a pillar of granite. He had brown eyes, hair that was almost black, and he didn't smile much.

Alfred was a head taller than his older brother and about thirty pounds lighter, with long whiplash muscles and a pair of hips that could slide through a darning hoop. His light brown hair was curly, he had blue eyes, and he liked to grin.

When they were twelve and ten respectively, their folks had been massacred by a roving band of Apaches. The boys would have met the same fate if they hadn't been off hunting jack-rabbits. The only blood kin they had left was their bachelor Uncle Hank. So they picked up a pair of crowbaits, and showed up one day at the Cedar Flat Ranch.

Albert slid off his mount.

"We're going to live with you, Uncle Hank. I'm Al," he said.

Alfred had been picking out a church hymn on his French harp. He took the instrument out of his mouth, and jumped down beside Albert.

"Sure, we're gonna live with you, Uncle Hank. I'm Al, too."

At that point, Hank found his voice. "Of course you buttons are gonna live with me. I been wondering where in tarnation you'd gone to. But you're not both Al. I ain't gonna have two yearlings running around here answering to the same handle. You"—he addressed the older boy—"will be Bert, and you"—he looked at the other lad—"will be Fred. From now on this is your home, and I'll make the dad-gummedest cow pokes out of you two this country ever saw."

So Bert and Fred they became, and Hank was as good as his word. They grew up into the hardest riding, hardest fisted cow punchers in the valley. Bert was the fist fighter of the two, and when he went into action he was a human thunderbolt of destruction. Twice he'd made kindling wood out of the tables and chairs in Kling's place, before the sheriff arrived to help Bert spend some time cooling off in the calaboose.

Fred was the gunslinger. He wore a brace of black-butted .45's that snuggled against his lean hips as naturally as if he'd been born with them. His draw was more than fast, a synchronized coordination of muscles that was beautiful to watch.

Despite his natural speed, he seldom used his guns, and he'd never killed a man. Too much fun to fight with his fists, he always said, although he knew he had to hit a man twice to give as much punishment as Bert could hand out with one blow.

The only thing they disagreed about was Fred's music. Bert had listened to about six French harps that Fred had worn out, but he never said much except to complain rather gently. Fred would keep right on toodling, and allow that Bert didn't have an ear for good music.

Bert was the cooler of the two, and inclined to scheme a way out when they got into a tight. Fred was the talker, and it was usually his tongue that got them into trouble, but he never worried about that because Bert was always around when the going got tough.

So they went on their merry way, working together like the parts of a clock, and not giving any thought to the proposition that life was a serious business.

Then, one evening, Hank came home late from Cowhorn.

The boys were already eating supper when Hank stomped in, pulled up a chair, speared three potatoes, and covered them with a plateful of

gravy. He didn't say anything, but both boys could see he was fuller of news than old Sam Phipps, editor of the Cowhorn *Blare*. Finally, Fred couldn't stand it any longer.

"Let's have it," he said.

"Have what?" Hank asked innocently.

"Why, whatever it is that's about to make your head pop open."

"Well, boys," Hank leaned back and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, "did either of you ever think of getting married and cut out this hell-raising?"

"Married?" Bert dropped a forkful of beef back into his plate, and for once Fred couldn't think of anything to say.

"Yeah, I said married. Ever hear of it? It's a state of living that sets in after you stand up before a preacher with a female alongside of you, and then you go home and have biscuits for supper that don't sink when you drop 'em in the gravy."

Bert was the cook, and ordinarily he'd have resented such an affront to his culinary artistry, but the idea was too amazing even for injured feelings.

Fred snorted. "The only unhitched gal in these parts is old Dugan's Susie, and besides having red hair, she can't cook worth a damn. Besides, she's so big she has to go through a door sideways."

"Now that's where you're wrong," Hank had the same expression on his face that their hound dog, Tip, did when he sneaked into the pantry last spring and stole the only ham in the house. "A new female's in Cowhorn. Her name's Miss Jane Collins, and she's staying with Mrs. Kennedy. I ain't lying when I tell you she's a right handsome morsel of femeenity."

Hank filled his mouth and sat back to enjoy the situation, but both boys were still too staggered to say anything.

"She came in on the stage this afternoon. I seen her myself. Now I think you boys ought to go right to work. We need a woman around here. This ranch needs a female touch."

FRED pushed back his plate.

"Yeah, this place needs a female touch, all right. A lot of dresses and such-like hanging around. We couldn't smoke in the house. She'd make Tip sleep outside. She'd—she'd, aw hell, she'd make us sleep in the barn."

Hank didn't say any more, but his words began to bear fruit. When Saturday night came around, Fred said he guessed he'd go to the dance in Cowhorn. Ordinarily, neither of them went because they couldn't stand Susie Dugan, and all the other women were married and just as homely. But this time Bert considered Fred's idea a good one, and allowed he'd go along just to hear some music that didn't come out of a French harp. So they slicked up and rode to Cowhorn.

The dance was up over Yancey's store, and the crowd was bigger than usual. The regular bunch was there—Sam Phipps and his wife, the Yancey's and the rest of the business people of town besides the married ranchers and their families. The kids were sitting on benches along the wall, and keeping time with the music by pounding their feet on the floor.

The Rigdon boys found the doorway blocked by a tightly pressed knot of cowhands, but Bert got in front and with Fred behind, they ploughed their way through. When the ones inside the dancehall saw who was coming, they opened a way and let them in. That was usually the best thing to do when the Rigdon brothers wanted to get somewhere.

Inside, punchers were leaning against the wall on both sides of the door. Every ranch in the valley was represented, all the way from the big Running W, in the south end, to the Bar 99, over on Testament Creek.

"Quite a crowd," Bert observed.

"Yeah, wonder what caused it," Fred said.

Then they saw her. She was danc-

ing with Luke Bitters, foreman of the Slash 10. Hank hadn't lied when he'd said she was pretty. She wasn't tall—came about to Bitters' shoulders—and slim. Her skin was white and clear. The Slash 10 foreman had just said something funny, for as they danced by she threw her head back and laughed up at him.

"I'll bet she never was on a ranch," Bert said. "I'll bet she doesn't know what end of a steer you throw the rope over."

"Probably can't cook, neither," Fred nodded in agreement.

The music stopped, and Bert was looking around to see who was there.

Susie Dugan was sitting along the wall, but not a man was within twenty feet of her.

"Susie looks kinda lonesome, Fred," he said, but Fred didn't answer.

Bert turned his head, and saw that his brother had disappeared. Then the music started, and there was Fred with Jane Collins in his arms.

Fred usually had a lot of smart remarks to make, but he couldn't think of any now. Jane's eyes were very dark, and when she looked at him, something happened inside. He didn't know just what. It was as if he were riding herd at night with no moon above. Just the depthless, black velvet of the sky that reached on and on and held the answer to all the things he wanted to know.

"Do you live here?" she asked in a throaty voice that sent the blood pounding through his veins.

"Yes. On the Cedar Flat Ranch. Me and my brother work for my uncle."

"That must be lots of fun, to work on a ranch."

He thought there was a wistful look in her dark eyes. Maybe Uncle Hank was right. The ranch did need a woman's touch. Just then, the music stopped.

"You live at Mrs. Kennedy's, don't you?" He guided her toward her seat.

"Yes. Everybody seems to know that," she laughed.

"I'd like to call on you Sunday. That is, if you're going to be at home."

"Oh, yes, I'll be at home. I'd love to have you."

BEFORE he could say anything else, a Running W hand stepped in and she was gone.

It was half an hour before Bert got a dance, and then he had to elbow two Running Ws, a Slash 10, and a Circle Chain out of the way before he got to her. Before they'd gone around the floor once, he decided that Uncle Hank was right. The ranch did need a woman's touch. He couldn't think of a thing to say, but when the music was over, he said:

"You're staying at Mrs. Kennedy's, I guess."

"Why, yes. I wonder how everybody knows that."

"I'd like to call on you tomorrow. It's Sunday. That is, if you're going to be at home."

"Yes, I'll be at home. I'd love to have you."

She was claimed by Carl Yancey then, and Bert glared after him. He was married. What did he want to step in for?

Bert made his way to the wall. Presently Fred came up.

"How'd you like her?" he asked.

"She's all right, I guess," he shrugged his shoulders and looked bored.

"Yeah," Fred grinned, "I thought she was all right, too."

"Let's go over to Kling's place and get a drink," Bert said. "I got kinda dry stepping around out there."

"That's a good idea," Fred agreed.

They shoved their way out of the dancehall, and crossed the street to Kling's saloon. It was almost empty, except for a few habitual hangers on and some of Kling's hard cases who were playing poker at a table in the back of the room.

Dakota Slim was dealing. As usual,

he sat with his back to the wall, his fingers never straying far from the ivory-handled guns that swung from his hips. Beside him was Butch Casey who claimed he could break a man's neck with his hands.

Windy Williams, the barkeep, shoved a bottle and a couple of glasses across the mahogany.

"Where's Kling?" Bert asked.

"He ain't in town," the bartender said. "Were you looking for him?"

"No." Bert set his glass on the bar and wiped his mouth. "I was just wondering. He's usually around."

"He won't be around much now, I reckon," Windy volunteered. "Dakota and Butch bought him out."

"The hell." Bert's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yep. Beauty's bought the bank."

"Reckon that means there's gonna be hard times around here." Fred grinned.

"Oh, I dunno." Windy squinted at the glass he was polishing. "Beauty's not a bad hombre. I've been thinking. . . ."

"Shut up, you damned fool," Casey had come up behind them, a scowl on his huge face. He was built like Bert and was half a head taller. "If you're gonna keep your job here, you're gonna learn to keep that big mug of yours shut." He turned to Bert. "If you two want to come in here and drink, it's all right with us, but I'm telling you, me and Dakota ain't gonna stand for none of your hell raising. The first time you come in here looking for trouble, you're sure gonna find it."

"Well now," Fred stepped away from the bar, "me and Bert's always looking for trouble. Just how'll you have it, Casey?"

He was smiling pleasantly, an expression belied by the hard glitter in his blue eyes.

"Hold on," Bert grabbed his arm. "Reckon I was a mite rough in here a couple of times, but don't forget that I'd been taken for quite a roll of *dinero* by one of your light-fingered dealers. You're a crook, Casey, you and Dakota and Kling and your whole damned outfit. From now on, I reckon, me and Fred can do our drinking in the Palace. Come on," he said to Fred, and stalked out.

FRED followed reluctantly.

"There's more to this than just meets the eye," Bert remarked, as they unhitched their broncs from the rack in front of Yancey's store.

"Mebbe so," Fred said, "but we've had a showdown coming with that outfit ever since they chucked you in the calaboose the last time. Tonight was as good a time as any."

"I didn't much feel like kicking up a ruckus tonight." Bert looked up at the light that streamed from the windows of the dancehall. The soft music of a waltz drifted down to them. "Maybe Uncle Hank's right. All this rip-roaring we been doing don't get us nowhere."

"Reckon not," Fred agreed. They swung into their saddles and turned their horses toward home. "She sure has nice eyes, don't she?"

Bert's only answer was a grunt. Fred took out his French harp and began playing. It was low, sweet music that echoed the feeling he had inside.

The next morning at breakfast, Hank looked at them with a knowing grin on his wrinkled face.

"Kinda funny, you boys going to the dance last night. You ain't gone for a coon's age, neither one of you."

"A fellow's gotta have a little fun," Fred said.

"How'd you like the new gal?"

"Purty nice," Fred tried not to appear enthusiastic.

Bert filled his mouth with a flapjack, and didn't say anything.

Both boys stayed around the house all morning and played at keeping busy.

After dinner, Fred looked out of the window and yawned loudly.

"It's a nice day," he said. "Guess I'll take a ride."

Bert watched him go out. After a few minutes he stretched casually.

"Guess I'll ride up and see if that bunch of critters on Dutch Flat are getting plenty of water," he said.

"Sure, go ahead." Hank hid a grin.

The waterhole on the Flat never went dry this early and Bert knew it.

Bert didn't follow Fred, but cut off to the north toward Dutch Flat. When he was out of sight of the house, he swung to the east and came into Cowhorn from that direction. A half dozen horses were tied in front of Mrs. Kennedy's, but he didn't think anything of it until he went into the house. Jane Collins met him at the door and greeted him pleasantly. She wore a fluffy white dress, and Bert thought she was prettier than when he'd seen her at the dance.

She ushered him into the living room, and he stopped in surprise. The room was overflowing with cowhands. Fred was sitting in a corner, and for once, he wasn't playing his French harp.

Somewhere Jane found a chair, and Bert sat down beside Luke Bitters.

Maybe Bert and Fred were better waiters than the others. Or perhaps they didn't want to compete with the Rigdon brothers. At any rate, the rest began drifting out. Bitters was the last to go. He glared savagely at Bert, and said he had some business uptown. Jane accompanied him to the door, and when she came back she looked puzzled.

"I wonder why they all had to go," she asked.

"I don't have any idea," Bert said.

"Maybe they figured Bert had the measles," Fred grinned. "You aiming to stay here in Cowhorn awhile, Miss Collins?"

"I hope to, that is, if I can find what I'm looking for. I want to buy a small ranch."

"Well now," Bert said, "I don't know of any good ranch that's for sale right now."

"Oh, I just want a small place. I only have a thousand dollars to put into a ranch."

Then both boys knew she didn't know anything about the cattle country. Nobody could do anything with a thousand dollars except buy out one of the little nesters who was trying to scrape a living out of the foothills, and that was certainly no place for a girl.

BERT started to tell her that when someone knocked. Jane went to the door, and in a moment came back with Beauty Kling. He was a tall man, this Kling, nearly as tall as Fred Rigdon, and heavier. He was always an elegant dresser, and now he wore a black coat, ruffled white shirt, and black string tie. When he saw the Rigdon boys, he scowled, his black eyes glittering like bits of chipped obsidian.

There was a long, tense moment of silence, the air pregnant with hostility, then both Bert and Fred growled a "Howdy, Kling."

Kling hid his hatred behind a forced smile, and with pretended courtesy, said, "Afternoon, gents," and sat down.

Jane looked from Fred to Bert to Kling, a puzzled expression on her face as if she couldn't understand the sullen antagonism that had laid its heavy hand upon the room. She tried to keep up a conversation, but monosyllables were her only answers. Presently Kling said he had some business at the bank, and Bert and Fred said they'd better be getting back to the ranch.

The three of them went out together. They reached the boardwalk.

"So you boys are aiming to curry the little filly," Kling said sarcastically.

Bert stopped beside his horse.

"Kling," he said bluntly, "you're no good, and everybody in Cowhorn

knows that. How you figure on running a bank is a mystery to me, but Miss Collins don't know what kind of a polecat you are. I'm telling you right here and now, stay away from her."

Kling's lips became a thin, red line.

"Nobody tells me anything, my friend."

"You've been told," and Bert untied his horse.

Fred got his mount from the rack in front of the Palace Saloon, and they rode out of town together.

It was Saturday before they went back to Cowhorn. After they'd bought some supplies at Yancey's store, they called at Mrs. Kennedy's. Jane met them at the door.

"I'm going to be a neighbor of yours," was the first thing she said. "I just bought Mr. Kling's little place on Easter Creek. They tell me that's close to your Cedar Flat Ranch."

"You what?" Bert spluttered.

"I said I bought Mr. Kling's place. Isn't that all right? Don't you want me for a neighbor?"

"We want you for a neighbor, all right, but that place is no good," Fred howled. "You haven't any water."

"Why," she looked uncertainly from one to the other, "there's plenty of water in the creek."

"Sure, but it's early now. That creek dries up about the middle of July."

"Did you pay a thousand dollars for that place?" Bert asked.

"Yes, I did," she said firmly. "Mr. Kling tells me it is a fine little place."

"Sure, he'd tell you that," Bert growled. "But Mr. Beauty Kling is the orneriest coyote I ever had the misfortune to meet up with. He's been running a saloon for years, and working with a gang of rustlers and road agents, hombres like Dakota Slim and Butch Casey."

"Has he ever been arrested?" Jane asked.

"No," Bert admitted, "He's too slick for that."

"Then I don't believe a word of it," she said grimly. "He's in the bank now, and I think he's a responsible business man."

"All right, all right, think what you want to, but you're out a thousand bucks. Fred and me'll get it back for you. I don't know how, but we will. If a play comes along, don't forget to boost your ante. Come on, Fred. Let's get home."

THEY strode down the walk, and when they reached the hitch-rack, Bert untied his mount.

"Aren't you going over to the bank and work Kling over?" Fred asked.

"Not now." Bert swung aboard, "We've got to cook up something smart. Kling needs to be took, and took good. I'll think up something."

By the time they reached home, there was a pleased expression on Bert's face.

"I think I've got it, Fred," he said. "We're going back to town soon as I find Uncle Hank."

Hank was shoeing a horse in the barn, and he looked up in surprise when he saw Bert.

"Hello," he said. "I thought you'd be taking the gal out for a ride today."

"We got a big deal on," Fred grinned, coming in behind his brother. "We're gonna see that a little retribution gets properly retributed."

"I want to borrow your nugget," Bert said.

"Gonna spend it?" Hank dug a purse out of his pocket and tossed a piece of yellow metal to Bert. "If you do, I'll skin you and hang your hide on a corral post."

"You'll get it back by dark," Bert promised. "Come on, Fred."

"It looks to me," Bert said, as they rode back to town, "that Kling bought the bank just to appear respectable, and probably he's working right along with Casey and Dakota Slim all the time. If this scheme works and people hear about it, they'll laugh Mr. Beauty Kling right out of town."

Briefly he explained his plan, and Fred grinned.

"It'll work, just like spreading butter on hot biscuits, if there is still a tie-up between Kling and his old bunch, and if Jane's smart enough to do her part."

"I don't know about Jane," Bert frowned. "I don't want to tell her what we're doing, the way she feels about Kling. As for the tie-up, he'll hear about it all right."

When they got to town, they went into the Palace Saloon, bought a drink, poured some whiskey on their shirt fronts, rumpled up their hair, and then reeled across the street and into the saloon that still bore the name, "Kling's Place."

It was the middle of the afternoon now, and cow punchers were lined up two deep along the bar.

"What the hell; what the hell," Fred bellowed. "Get out of the way, you cow nurses and let a couple of men drink."

When the men at the bar saw who it was, a gap miraculously opened up.

"Whiskey," Fred pounded on the bar. "Get a move on, Windy. Me and Bert's aiming to tear this place up. Come on, give us some of that gut wash that Casey calls whiskey."

He uncertainly poured a drink, gulped it, and handed the bottle to Bert.

"You poor devils," Fred swayed and caught the edge of the bar. "Riding around after a bunch of bawling steers, getting wet and cold and eating grub that'd give a hog a bellyache. No more of that for Bert and me."

"What are you talking about, Rigdon?" Luke Bitters asked.

Fred didn't have time to answer. Casey was coming from the back of the room. He had recognized the mood the Rigdon boys were in, and he wasn't taking any chances on having his place torn up.

"Get out of here, you Rigdons," he bellowed. "I told you not to come in here when you were on the prod."

"You're a damned fool, Casey," Fred shouted. "You and that ornery skunk Kling that you work for. He didn't pull such a fast one, selling that no-good place to Miss Collins."

"I said to get out," Casey looked as if he were going to have apoplexy.

"Sure, we'll get out, soon as we lay you out like a carpet and tromp on you. You ought to have a carpet in here. Floor's plumb dirty."

CASEY came in then like a bull, his head down and hamlike fists swinging. But it was Bert that stepped into his path. He moved amazingly fast for a man built as blocky as he was, ducked a roundhouse swing, and let his fists fly. One, two—*wham, bang*. Casey stopped as suddenly as if he'd hit a stone wall. He went back and down, his feet skidding out from under him, and his head cracked into the side of the bar with a sickening thud.

Dakota Slim was in the center of the room. When he saw Casey go down, he went for his gun, but Fred had been looking for that. There was no sign of drunkenness about the Rigdon boys now. Fred's right hand drove down in what was only a blur of motion to the onlookers, came up and his gun thundered.

Dakota Slim yelled in sudden agony, and clutched bullet riddled fingers as his own Colt dropped to the floor.

Bert turned to the bar and took another drink.

"I came in here to tell you hombres something, and these hellers try to kill us. Look here, does anybody know gold when they see it?"

Gold! The magic word that does strange things to all men. They crowded around Bert, pushing, shoving, charging for a look at the piece of yellow metal that he held in his hand.

"That's sure as hell gold," one old-timer shouted. "Where'd you get it, Rigdon?"

"It's on that place Kling sold Miss

Collins," Bert chortled. "The money grubbing coyote kinda foxed himself. That Easter Creek bed's full of it."

It was as if Bert had turned a hurricane loose in the saloon. The men went boiling out of there a howling mob, pouring through the front door, out of the windows, and through the back door. Even grizzled Mike Melody, the swamper, joined the rush. Windy Wilkins took off his apron, threw it into the air yelling "Gold," vaulted across the bar, and jumped into the stampede.

"Let's go," Bert said.

They went out through the nearest window, and stayed in the alley while the crowd roared out of town on horses, buckboards, spring wagons and anything else that they could find.

Within five minutes the street was deserted. Then Beauty Kling came out of his bank and started across the street to Mrs. Kennedy's house.

"There he goes," Bert chuckled.

They ran down the sidewalk, but before they caught him he had reached Mrs. Kennedy's gate.

"Get out of my way," Kling snarled.

"Wait a minute," Bert caught his arm. "I told you to stay away . . ."

Kling swung his fist into Bert's face, a jarring, unexpected punch. Bert lashed out with one blow that picked Kling off the ground. He went down into the dirt of the street and didn't get up.

Jane Collins came running out of the house.

"You bullies," she shrieked. "Get out. Go away. I never want to see you again."

She knelt in the dirt beside Kling, talking to him in a mothering tone. He got to his feet, a little wobbly, and Jane helped him into the house.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle." Fred watched them until the door closed. Then he snorted. "Bullies! Hell's bells! After what we were doing for her."

"And that," Bert said, "proves how much we know about women. Looks like it's time for us to mosey along."

"If and when them hombres get back from Easter Creek, it might be a good idea for us to be farther away than home."

FRED pulled his French harp out of his pocket, and began playing, "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground."

"For once," Bert admitted, "your so-called music is fitting for the way I feel."

There was a gloomy atmosphere around the Cedar Flat Ranch that night, and the boys didn't even have their normal appetite by breakfast time. It was in the middle of the morning when they were sprawled on the ground in front of the ranchhouse that Fred suddenly sat up.

"Somebody coming," he announced.

Bert looked down the road. He recognized the bay as a horse that belonged to the livery stable in town, but he didn't think he knew the rider.

"By damn," Fred yelled, "it's her."

Bert rubbed his eyes, and he saw that Fred was right. It was Jane, but the horse was coming along at a ground-eating clip, and the girl was riding as if she had been born in a saddle. She wore a cream-colored Stetson, riding breeches, and tan boots, and they weren't new. Bert wondered where she'd found an outfit like that.

She pulled up and sat smiling down at them.

They were on their feet, hats in their hands, and they didn't know quite what to say.

"Good morning," she said. "I rode out to apologize for what I said when you knocked Kling down. I thought you probably wouldn't understand."

Fred was the first to find his voice.

"We didn't, exactly."

"I'll tell you all about it. You see, I'm not exactly what I pretended. I wanted people to think I didn't know anything about the West—just an Eastern girl who would be an easy mark for somebody like Kling. My

brother was here awhile last year and Kling took him for three thousand dollars in a crooked poker game, and there wasn't anything he could do against the gunmen Kling had in his saloon.

"He came home broke. We needed the money and he needed a lesson, so I left home to do both. He had stayed with Mrs. Kennedy. I wrote to her and she gave me a big build-up so that most of the town knew I was coming, but they didn't know I was Jim's sister.

"I SAW a lot of Kling last week, and he was very interested in my money. I had several plans, but I wanted him to think I didn't have much savvy, so I bought his place. Then you boys came in yesterday, and said you'd get it back.

"I just sat back and waited, because I thought you might figure out something that was better than my ideas. Mrs. Kennedy had just told me about the gold rush. She'd been in Yancey's store when everybody left. Then when I saw you running down the street after Kling, I knew it was a trick, but I didn't want you knocking him around."

"I didn't figure on hitting him," Bert mumbled. "We were aiming to make him think we were trying to keep him from seeing you like we'd told him."

"I see," she nodded. "Well, anyhow, that was my chance to make Kling think I was all for him, so I brought him in the house and fussed over him to beat the band." She laughed.

"Well, I've got to make that noon stage. Oh, I forgot to tell you. My brother and I live on the California coast, and I've really never been very far East. We have a cattle ranch in the Eel River country. If you're ever around there, please look me up. We can always use a couple of—men. So long."

"Wait a minute," Bert yelled. "What did you do with that no-good place of Kling's you bought?"

"Why, I sold that back to him for five thousand dollars," she called over her shoulder. "He thought there was gold on it."

"Yippee," Fred threw his Stetson into the air. "It worked."

Bert stood open-mouthed, watching the girl ride away.

"And that," he said, "as I once remarked, proves how much we know about women."

Fred pulled out his French harp and blew a long note. He took the instrument out of his mouth and started thinking aloud.

"You know," he said, "I always wanted to see that California coast country. I don't think Uncle Hank's gonna need us much after fall roundup."

"No, reckon he won't," Bert grinned. "She said they could always use a couple of—men."

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Riders of the Rain

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Author of "Job for a Ranger," "Riders of the Shadows," etc.

The man's shoulders hit the wall, and his boots slid from beneath his wilting body

Donna King Journeys Through the Stormy Rangeland on a Mission Fraught With Danger and Mystery!

RAIN overtook the buckboard when Donna King still had fifteen miles to go. In one loud, lightning-ripped instant, the shimmering horizons she loved were blotted out by a wet welter, and the first fury changed to a gray downpour as bleak as her mood. Farther on, she drew leather at the B Bar corrals.

Jumping down to open the pasture

gate, she heard Dane Benson's shout of greeting above the swishing drive of the rain on tarp and slicker, and her heart shrank at the thought of seeing him. Which only went to prove that a woman's heart is strange beyond understanding, because Donna King had promised to marry Dane.

She hurried the team through the gate and climbed back to her seat. Her yellow slicker and even brighter hair made her a slender, golden picture of loveliness in the rain's dreary murk.

IT WAS characteristic of Donna that she didn't wait for Benson to open and close the gate for her, for she had inherited proud independence from her father, along with that high-held chin which lost none of its soft, curved charm because it held determination.

She was much like old Rufe King who had asked few favors of his neighbors since that day more than twenty years before when he had unhitched and driven a singletree from his wagon into the uncompromising soil of the Big Bend, as his first stake.

This marked a corner of the Singletree range that had been Old Rufe's life and Donna's life. It marked the beginning of a battle that was not yet ended and never would be, it seemed—a battle with rustlers and Border *bandidos,* with drought and grass fires and flood. On the rocky reaches of the Singletree spread, Old Rufe had grazed his longhorn herds, buried his wife, and reared his golden-haired daughter to be as straight and proud and defiant as himself.

Dane Benson shouldered his big bulk through the wind-fluttered curtain of rain, smiling at the girl and shaking his head.

"Lord, Donna, I never seen anybody like yuh!" rumbled the B Bar owner. "With a thousand and one things to do, I waited here until the rain started, just to open this gate for yuh. Then yuh do it yoreself! Climb down and come in out of the wet."

She ignored his outstretched arms. Her smile was brief and, perhaps, a little wistful.

The B Bar stone ranchhouse was as comfortable as any bachelor's quarters could be, and looked inviting. Like everything else on Benson's spread, it was more substantial than the sprawling Singletree adobe.

"You weren't quick enough," Donna chided, then gave a quick toss of her head that slung water from her white Stetson's brim. "I'm in a big hurry, Dane. The ranch is out of chuck. Besides—I've some news for Dad."

Benson nodded, pulling his slicker collar high and looking thoughtful. He was handsome in a big, slow way, with the good nature that went with an absence of worries. It was always flashing into Donna's mind that Dane had never known the bitterness of struggle, that he was like the white-faced Herefords he grazed on the lush valley of the B Bar. Rufe King, busy paying last year's debts with this year's beef, had clung to the gaunt longhorns.

"What kind of news?" he asked. "Good or bad?"

"Same old kind," said the girl, and the lifted shrug of her slickered shoulder was more truthful than her light tone. "Money's tighter than ever. We would have been able to borrow if we had tried two days ago. But the bank was held up yesterday."

"No!" Dane Benson ejaculated. "Who did it?"

Donna's voice sounded far away and strained in her own ears.

"They say Bob Wiley was in the gang," she said, and fumbled with the reins, not wanting to see the "I-told-you-so" in Benson's dark eyes. A year before, when the tall, reckless Wiley had been punching cows for the Singletree, he had been Benson's rival for her heart.

But Dane's sincerity sounded genuine.

"I'm plumb sorry to hear that, Donna. If Bob would settle down and

straighten out, he wouldn't be a bad hombre. Trouble with him is bad company, and he don't seem to realize that the law has come west of the Pecos and took the place of reckless gunslinging. How was the job pulled, and how much did they get?"

"About five thousand dollars. Just the amount Dad wanted to borrow. It happened so quickly nobody knows much about it. There were four or five men, altogether, and everybody but Bob wore a slicker and a mask. They shot Doane, the cashier. Sheriff Morgan was coming up the street on foot, and he saw them run out to their horses. He emptied his gun at them and hit one, he says. They scattered and headed for the Border. There's a posse out."

"Five thousand dollars," Dane Benson said, shaking his head. If there was one thing in his make-up the girl could criticize, it was his love of money. "That would have pulled the Singletree through until fall, eh?"

Donna nodded, her soft, full lips drawn taut. She knew what was coming now.

"Donna, darling," Benson pleaded, reaching up to lay a hand on her arm, "talk to yore dad again! Make him see how he ought to sell out to me. At least he could sell me the west ten sections, and that would pull him through."

"It's no use, Dane. You know Dad."

"Yes, but he has you to think about, too. We could get married right away, if yuh didn't have him to worry about. I'll give him the job as foreman. We'll clean out the longhorn strain and stock the combined ranges with Herefords. Please try, Donna!"

SHE shook her head, her proud chin higher. She would never marry Dane Benson until Old Rufe was financially secure. From the day Benson had proposed, somehow his marriage offer had seemed to her to be part and parcel of a land deal.

"Dad may lose the Singletree, but he'll never sell it," she said. "Maybe this rain will help the grass, and he can pull through some way. Besides, you don't want the west ten sections. There's nothing on that strip but rocks. Dad is still trying to interest mining capital in it, and he's never had any luck."

Benson shook his head. "Gosh only knows where the King family stubbornness is gettin' both of yuh!" he said. "Won't you come in for awhile?"

But Donna slapped wet rein leather on the backs of the buckskins, and waved her gauntleted hand as the wheels began to roll. Benson backed his big frame against the stone corral fence and watched as she vanished in the silver-arrowed rain. The Kings, father and daughter, he was thinking were an independent pair.

Driving on along the mesquite-bordered road to the Singletree, Donna's thoughts were as dark as the rain clouds that brushed the tops of the rimrocked hills. Her mind told her that Dane Benson's plan was the only way out for the mortgaged ranch she and her father loved. Her proud heart rebelled.

She climbed the divide, and the wind rose to a wild, wet fury. The grassy valleys of the B Bar were behind, and a little farther on was the western strip of the Singletree, in its rocky wildness. When finally she opened the gate into Singletree range, water was over her spurred ankles, and the buckboard slipped and swayed on the treacherous slant of the farther divide hill.

An impatient exclamation leaped to the girl's lips as she sighted the west prong of Buckhorn draw. Where the road canted down into the wild walnuts, a yellow flood was swirling, licking at the driftwood left by the previous spring's high water. Too deep for the tarpaulin-covered load of chuck behind the buckboard seat on which she rode.

It was still rising, too. Donna wasted only a minute listening to the

sullen roar of the torrent. There was a longer way around, to the north, where the west fork of Buckhorn was wider and more shallow. She swung the team through the untracked mesquites, paralleling the flood.

Followed two miles of twisting and turning, of ducking water-laden mesquite branches that could make her rain-tingled cheeks no wetter. Two miles of slow going, wondering why some men were born to wealth, while others had to fight every step of their way. Of wondering why gay, reckless Bob Wiley allowed himself to get mixed up with a bank robbery gang, and if Rufe King would possibly consider this new proposal of selling the western ten sections.

It wasn't right to ask him, Donna decided. Because Dane Benson undoubtedly had made the offer out of generosity and love for her. That ten sections of malpais would be practically worthless to him and his white-faced steers.

She swung the buckskins back toward the draw, the wheels rattling on flat, limestone ledges, slanting down to the wide channel. Standing up, Donna peered through the swirl and saw that even here it would be a close call for the load of provisions.

She halted, and with a strength unguessed by her slenderness, lifted a box of the more perishable groceries to the seat, covering it with a corner of the tarp.

The roar in the draw had flattened, here, to a droning dullness. Donna pointed the team into the flood.

IT ROSE, yellow and menacing, over the hocks of the sturdy buckskins. She felt the buckboard shudder, saw the riffle of water streak downstream from the wheels, and watched anxiously as they neared the center of the channel.

Water swished against the floorboards and seeped through a crack at her feet. But it would get no deeper, now. That big willow, bending under the surge of the current, marked the middle of the channel.

There would still be the eastern prong of Buckhorn to cross. It was sweeping over there a mile farther, gullying down the eastern side of the rocky ridge that thrust like a bony finger from the divide. This western fork bordered the west side of the ridge, and a few miles below its point the two streams angled together in their course to the Rio Grande.

The roar came suddenly, deepening over the swishing current like continuous, booming surf, drowning the flat dullness with an intensity not to be mistaken.

Donna's widened blue eyes jerked upstream. She saw the big willow bend and dip until it almost vanished. And then, riding over it, came the foam-crested wall.

Cloudburst!

Divide rimrocks had ripped the bottom from those low-hanging clouds. With water-holes filled and the channel of Buckhorn already above normal rain flow, there was nothing to delay this swift, sullen sweep of destruction.

Fear's cold fingers plucked at her heart, but she was not Rufe King's daughter without the high heritage of Rufe King's courage. There might yet be time to make the farther bank.

She whipped over the sodden ends of tied reins, and stung the horses. Her shout was a puny whisper in the roar.

A thunder shook the smaller, stream-bent willows downstream. It was like a thousand cattle stampeding over the echoing rocks of the Singletree range. The girl lashed out again, and the off horse stumbled on a slippery rock. He recovered gallantly, but Donna was already yanking off her gloves and fumbling inside her slicker.

As she opened the gleaming blade of the skinning knife, it mirrored that curling wall of death.

It leaned against the lancing rain, rolling down upon her as a giant

comber rolls against a sandy beach. It towered six feet over the level water, and driftwood rode its tawny crest as the willow tops flattened. It was less than thirty yards away.

Donna leaned down and made swift, sure strokes. One of the trace leathers parted, but the other was stubborn. She clung to the foot-board and slashed at it. The horses, at least, could save themselves.

The wall struck, and the shock seemed prolonged, endless. Donna saw the trace part with a jerk of flying leather. The buckboard whirled, tongue swinging upstream. A horse's shrill squeal of terror knifed the roar.

There was one swift glance that would always hold in Donna's memory —a split instant of action that was etched on her brain. It showed the buckboard's left wheels swung crazily to the pouring sky, provisions spilling from the seat, the tongue snapping like a rotten picket, the horses struggling toward shore and safety.

Not until the wet smother surged over her did she realize she was in the water. It hammered her down as if she were being pounded by the flat of a giant's hand. It rolled her across rocks and thrust her slender body through the scratching tangle of wild walnut bushes. Her slicker hampered her swimming. The weight of her shop-made boots and the pearl-handled .38 holstered at her waist seemed to drag her under.

THERE must have been sixty seconds of pounding, choking fury before she was driven against an unyielding something that knocked what little breath remained from her body. She clutched it desperately, opened her eyes, and dared to breathe.

It was a willow in the rim of the eddying current, its limbs broken, its top barely above water. She saw the horses climb out and vanish in the rain, and then, after a long time, she struck out for the shore, breathlessly buffeted and infinitely weary.

Her boots touched bottom. She waded, then, and sat on a ledge of limestone at the draw's edge, shivering as the wind drove against the wetness of her clothes.

It was still ten miles to the ranch, and she doubted whether the flood-terrified horses would be anywhere within walking distance of the spot where they had emerged. She looked up at the softened outline of the rocky ridge and got her bearings. Then she remembered the old prospector's cabin.

It squatted close against the point of the hill, so it could not be far. The old man who once had lived there had been killed in a saloon brawl at Maravillas, and Donna hadn't been in the place since she was a child. But she remembered the two-room shack, with its half loft, its cracked, warped floor and rusty, sheet-iron stove.

She searched her pocket anxiously as she started walking, water swishing in her boots at every step. With a glad relief, she found the small waterproof container in which she carried matches. She could kindle a fire, dry her clothes, and wait for the storm to pass.

Her Stetson was gone. Her hair had tumbled to a clinging, curling mass, reaching just below her shoulders. The gold was gone from it with the wetness. It was now the color of wild honey.

She leaned against the slanting rain, and forced herself on. At last she saw it—the cabin, its back to the ridge. A silver filigree of water fluttered from its clapboard roof.

The door yielded, and she stood in the dim mustiness of the main room. A wood rat scurried under the stove and into the nest it had built high in the corner.

Donna shucked the wet slicker and emptied the water from her boots. She robbed the wood rat's nest of dry branches and paper, and huddled over the old stove as the flame flickered, then leaped upward. Smoke billowed from a dozen cracks in the stove, but

the heat began to spread comfortingly. Donna added more fuel, then removed her cartridge belt and slung it, with the holstered gun, over the back of a rickety, hide-bottomed chair.

There seemed to be a draught. In her stockinged feet, Donna went to close the partly-opened door to the rear room. As she reached for the knob, she halted tensely, and the color that had been returning to her cheeks suddenly ebbed.

Above the drone of the rain on the clapboards, she could hear the unmistakable sound of a man's heavy breathing!

Her first impulse was to flee, but where could she go, in the rain? She went back to the stove and yanked on her boots.

Her heart was a trip-hammer, driving the breath from her body.

She lifted the gun from its holster and tiptoed to the door, pushing it wider. The creak of a rusty hinge startled her, and she thrust the gun before her.

"Who's there?" she demanded, and kicked the door wide.

A tall man lay sprawled on a tarp and blanket, his head on a saddle. The shadows that lay deep along the wall of the rear room obscured his face, and he didn't move until the door banged against the wall.

THEN a muttered oath came out of the shadows, and the tall man jerked into sudden, startled wakefulness. From nowhere, it seemed, a six-gun leaped into his hand as he sat up and whirled to face the door.

Donna gasped. "Bob Wiley!"

"Donna!" he exclaimed with equal surprise, lowering the gun sheepishly. "I shore musta been sleepin' plenty hard. What yuh doin' here? Who's with yuh?"

A sharpness steeled his soft drawl as he asked the questions. Without waiting for an answer, he brushed the girl aside and took a long stride into the main room.

"There's nobody," Donna said. "Why, Bob! You're wounded!"

She saw the dark, caked stain on his shirt, high at the left shoulder. Then remembrance of how he probably had received the wound came like a blow. Robbing a bank! He wasn't the same irresponsible, gay cowboy who had made love to her in the moonlight that drenched the porch on summer nights at the Singletree. He was a criminal, now, wanted and hunted.

She remembered Dane Benson's words—"Trouble with him is bad company." Bob Wiley had joined the wild bunch, and this was how the wild bunch always ended up—holed up somewhere, waiting for the Law.

Bob whirled on her. He had his left thumb hooked in his cartridge belt to support the wounded arm.

"Yuh've got to get out of here, pronto!" he declared. "Hurry, Donna! Get yore hoss. It's nearly dark!"

"I haven't got a horse. I was driving the buckboard and got caught in the draw in a cloudburst. The horses are gone."

"But yuh can't stay!" He was at her side, gripping her arm with the same intensity that filled his words. "Yuh're not safe here!"

"Are you?" Donna retorted, turning abruptly from him.

She opened the front door and felt the coolness of the rain against her fevered face. Her mind was a confused battleground of thoughts. Perhaps Bob even had some of the bank money. If the Law came for him and got it back, the bank ought to be ready to advance part of the loan to her father. There would be a reward, too.

She throttled the thought and flung it from her mind. Bob Wiley was standing in the center of the room, watching her. She saw the slow hardening of his gray eyes.

"I see," he said. "I *sabe*, now. Yuh've been to Maravillas."

Donna nodded.

"Yuh believed 'em when they said I helped rob a bank?"

"What else could I do?" she snapped at him. "You were shot, running away. Oh . . . Why did you do it, Bob? Why? Bad company, I suppose!"

The tall man's laugh was mirthless, bitter. He wasn't handsome in the usual sense of the word. Too rugged, too intensely masculine, with his wide, firm slash of mouth and square jaw. More like Rufe King's type—the rangy, longhorn strain.

But Bob was the outlaw breed, Donna told herself.

"Yeah. I reckon yuh could call it that, Donna," he was saying. "Nothin' but bad company got me into this mess. But that has nothin' to do with you. Mebbe if I'd settled down, things would be different."

Donna couldn't answer, did not dare meet his eyes again.

"Mebbe," he ventured softly, "you coulda loved me."

"You'd better ride for the Border!" she said. "There's a posse out. The rain will wash out your tracks if you go now."

The mirthless laugh again. "I haven't got a hoss, in the first place. In the second place, I'm not goin'. But you are—even if yuh have to walk home. Get movin'!"

HER chin came up. Knowing Rufe King, he read the danger sign blazing in her storm-blue eyes.

"I'm not leaving you!" she retorted. "You're wounded. Sit down here and let me dress your shoulder."

"Yuh're as stubborn as ever," he growled. "All right. But there are some things I've got to do, first. Got to drag this saddle and beddin' into a dark corner, where it won't be seen."

Donna busied herself at her own task. She found a kettle on the cobwebbed shelf, caught water in it under the eaves, and placed it on the stove. She tore a clean strip from her shirtwaist, and bathed the bullet wound. The slug had entered from behind, ploughing upward, coming out almost on top of his shoulder.

"It must hurt terribly," she murmured, when he winced.

"Not when you're touchin' it, honey!" he said. "Donna—yuh do love me a little bit, don't yuh? Won't yuh say yuh do?"

"A little!" she said lightly, and smiled.

That was all, she told herself, and yet his bronzed cheek against her arm was a caress. She fought against this wonder that she should have known a year ago. Now she was engaged to another man; now Bob Wiley was a bank robber.

"Listen, darlin'!" he said seriously, catching her hand and drawing it across his lips. "Just trust in me for a little while. Then, if yuh still want me to get across the Border, I'll go. I've done nothin' but roam around since—since yuh told me yuh wouldn't marry me. So it won't matter. But now—well, I told yuh it's not safe here for yuh. If yuh stay, yuh've got to do what I say."

She was staying. A sob caught in her throat as she nodded.

"Pour that water in the stove," he ordered. "And get yore gun-belt off the chair. Is that thirty-eight in workin' order?"

"I guess so. It wasn't in the water long. But—but you're not going to resist, Bob. You'll only make it worse. Give up, and if you've got any of the money, turn it over to them. I'll make up the rest of it, somehow!"

Something of the old recklessness came back to Bob Wiley's laugh. There was that in her eyes and voice which made him sure of himself. He caught Donna in his good arm, and pulled her close. She tried to remember Dane Benson, but the tall man's lips were bruising her own with a fierceness that was strangely tender.

"Donna, darlin'!" he whispered, breaking away. "I asked yuh to trust in me a little while, not to pay any debts I might be owin'. I've always loved yuh."

"I don't care what you've done,

Bob," Donna heard herself saying. "It's hopeless, now, I guess. But I love you, too."

"Things ain't ever plump hopeless. There's somethin' I want to tell yuh, Donna, before—"

His lean jaw snapped shut. Donna heard it, too. The staccato rise and fall of horses' hoofs somewhere down toward the flooded draw, pounding across the limestone ledges. The Law, Donna thought. This was how the wild bunch always ended up—holed up and waiting.

The softness was gone out of Bob Wiley. She had never seen a man so cool and tense. He lifted a stove lid, doused the little fire that was left with the water, and watched the smelly steam pour out. Then he stepped back and surveyed the half loft.

"They're comin', Donna, just like I figgered they would. Lucky it's gettin' dark in here. They won't notice the dust is disturbed, or that yore slicker's dripped on the floor. Climb up into the loft, and lie down!"

The girl balked. "And what will you be doing?"

"I'll go up with yuh!" he promised. "Hurry, now."

THE ladder was rickety and old, and cobwebs brushed her face in the utter darkness that lay close under the dripping clapboards. She crawled into a litter of chips and sticks. A wood rat darted ahead of her.

Lying down with her head toward the edge of the loft, Donna still didn't understand. It was odd that the posse should have been able to trail him here, in all the rain. A sudden hope flashed into her mind. Perhaps her father had ridden to meet her and had found the buckskins still in their harness!

Bob Wiley's head and shoulders loomed over the loft flooring. He grunted with the pain the climb cost him, and he might have fallen if the girl hadn't caught his good arm and pulled with all her strength.

"This is crazy!" she flared, as he stretched beside her, panting. "You ought to be getting out of here! You've got a saddle. I might find one of those horses that was hitched to the buckboard."

"Honey," he answered, and his strong white teeth gleamed in a smile, "I'm settlin' down for fair. I'm through roamin'. I learned one lesson yesterday, and today I learned somethin' a lot more important. That you love me. I'm settlin' down!"

Listening to the hoofbeats coming nearer, Dona wondered how a bank robber could settle down. The riders crossed the limestone. Their horses were slogging through the mud, now. They came straight to the cabin door, and the girl was sure they would hear the loud hammering of her heart.

"Here, darlin'!" whispered Bob Wiley. "Keep this for me. If anything happens to me, turn it over to the bank—and tell 'em that I didn't steal it. It's five thousand dollars!"

She felt the huge roll of greenbacks pressed into her hand, and she recoiled as she took the money. But his words were a song to the lilt of her heart! "Tell 'em I didn't steal it!"

Wet saddle leather creaked outside. The rusty hinges of the door creaked. Spurs were jingling over the threshold. A man swore loudly. It was a strange manner for the posse to enter a place where their quarry was hiding.

"Smells wet even in here," commented the man who had cursed. "Well, we're jest on time. It's dark now in a few minutes."

Another man grunted, and Donna heard the rustle of cigarette papers. When a match flared, she lifted her head as high as she dared. But the man's Stetson brim hid his face, and the wavering, distorted shadow cast on the wall told her nothing.

Bob Wiley's good arm forced her down. The fragrance of tobacco smoke wafted up to the pair in hiding. Donna's head was whirling as she tried to straighten out the tangle in her

mind. There was a mystery here, somewhere.

"If Pete's doublecrossed us—" growled one of the men, and left the threat unfinished.

He strode to the door. The other was sitting in the cowhide chair, chuckling.

"Pete's not loco enough to try that!" he declared. "He'll be here by the time the boss shows up. Both of 'em likely held up by the water in the draws. We shore picked a swell spot!"

"Well, nobody knew it was goin' to rain like this," the other man said.

He emptied water from his boots and stamped into them again with a jingle of spurs. His cigarette, only half-smoked, arced through the gloom and lay glowing on the floor while he rolled another quirly.

Donna was beginning to understand. This wasn't the posse, but the other members of the gang. She knew a glad relief. At least, Bob Wiley wasn't in imminent danger of capture.

If they left, he stood a good chance of escape.

IN CONTRAST to her nervous tension, the tall cowboy was lying quietly beside her, listening. She was thankful for the patter of the slackening rain on the roof, for it drowned the sound of their breathing.

Bob's arm muscles tightened.

"Here comes one of 'em!" the smoker was saying. He ground the second cigarette under his boot heel, and jingled his spurs to the door while the other waited only long enough to light the wall lamp, and turn it low.

Wiley's lips were at Donna's ear.

"Move over against the wall!" he whispered.

She took advantage of the noise at the door and obeyed. Now she could see nothing, but she heard the heavy tread of the new arrival, and unintelligible words from him as he halted just outside the cabin.

"Nope, Pete hasn't showed," reported the smoker. "And he's got the *dinero!* But I reckon he'll be here any minute."

"Yuh shore he got away all right?" the new arrival asked. "Last I seen of him, he was cutting south on the main road."

Donna King's golden head whirled dizzily. For the first time in her healthy young life, she felt as if she might faint.

That voice belonged to Dane Benson!

As if far away, so far that it mingled with the roaring of Buckhorn's west prong, she heard one of the other men talking. Gradually the blurred words cleared, and she heard:

"—and it worked out fine. Lucky that hombre was in the bank. His face was the only one Doane saw. 'Course, when Pete let Doane have it, it turned out not to make no difference, one way or the other. Doane won't be testifyin'."

"And that was bad business!" grunted Dane Benson. "I'm goin' to have it out with Pete on that score. There's just one more job I've got figgered out, and I won't have any itchy trigger fingers helpin' on it, if I know it. The next hombre might not die."

"How's the silver assay?" the man in the cabin door asked.

Benson lighted a cigarette, and laughed as he exhaled smoke.

"It runs plenty. To look at this shack, yuh'd never think it was practically settin' on a million dollar vein, would yuh? That old prospector dug everywhere but right under the cabin. And we're a cinch to get it. If I can work things right, I can buy this land outright. And if I can't do that, I'll get it anyway." He laughed again. "Because the old man won't live always, and I'm goin' to marry the girl!"

Donna felt the sweep of anger burning into her cheeks. She tugged the pearl-handled .38 from its wet holster, and might have brought the gun into play if Bob Wiley hadn't acted when he did.

But the tall cowboy had heard all he

needed to hear. Something fell with a crash in the back room. Donna's tense nerves nearly snapped at the sound, then she realized that Bob Wiley had thrown a stick from the wood rat's nest through the open door.

"What's that?" Benson snapped, the lazy well being gone from his voice, leaving it strangely akin to the metallic click of his thumbed-back hammer.

The cabin shook under his heavy tread. The other two men went with him. They approached the rear door cautiously, crowded against it, and peered into the darkness.

"Rats, mebbe!" said one.

"We'll see!" Benson growled, scratching a match on the wall.

The brilliance grew in his cupped hand. Donna could see him plainly as he thrust the light through the doorway. The shadows leaped and wavered beyond.

SHE was thinking: "Now they'd see the saddle and the bedding roll! Now it would be three to one—and that one wounded. No! Three to two. When the shooting starts, I'll be at Bob's side."

But he sprang from the loft like a lean, lithe panther. She jumped, startled, as his dark shape shot down. He landed on the balls of his feet, with a jingle of spurs, in the center of the room.

"Reach high!" he ordered coolly.

Benson ripped out a curse. Donna, jerking to her hands and knees at the rim of the loft, could see only an indistinct mass as the three men whirled, snarling. Then gun-flame streaked to meet gun-flame, in a livid, crazy quilt pattern spread beneath her.

Somebody fell at the first hammering roar. It wasn't Bob Wiley. His gun thundered again and again. Donna could see Benson backing into the shed, taking crouching shelter behind the door jamb, blazing back at the man she loved, and the first man who had fallen sprawled across the table.

There was another crash, a queer, gurgling cough. The other man's shoulders hit the wall, and his boots slid out from beneath his wilting body.

Wiley's gun clicked, empty, and Benson's bulk filled the doorway. The dimness of the room below where blue powder smoke swirled was terrifying.

"So it's you, Wiley!" gritted the B Bar owner. "Here's where yuh sell out cheap. Like anybody's liable to sell out when he cuts hisself in on another man's deal. Before yuh go, yuh might have somethin' to say. Talk up—and make it fast."

"Yeah!" There was supreme contempt in the tall cowboy's drawl. "I want to tell yuh there's no use lookin' for Pete Yeager. He's dead. I *had* to run out of that bank, Benson, or be mistaken for one of yore gang. And don't forget it was Pete who cut me in on yore crooked deal. I was just cashin' a check when he stepped up behind me and jammed one gun in my ribs and threw the other one down on the cashier. I didn't have a gun. This is Pete Yeager's gun I've got now, Benson. Before he died, he told me the boss of this outfit was comin' here tonight."

Benson sneered. "Mighty long speech, Wiley. But yuh won't live to tell it to nobody else. And I can be the man who trailed the gang here and wiped 'em out—*sabe?* Turn towards the door, Wiley!"

The cowboy was gathering his muscles for a spring. Donna heard his boot heels click on the floor. She could see Benson's gun, smoke still wisping from its muzzle.

The crack of the .38 sounded distant. But its kick against the heel of her palm was a comforting thing. She fired again.

There was a gun blazing below, but the bullet ripped harmlessly into the warped flooring. Dane Benson cried out, more in surprise than pain, and fell across the smoking weapon.

Donna was halfway down the ladder before the crash of his heavy body had ceased echoing in the room. Bob Wiley caught her and held her close.

"Yuh didn't kill him, honey!" he soothed. "He'll live to stand trial. Don't—don't cry!"

THE tears came, but she was Rufe King's daughter, and they were really tears of happiness.

There would be no arrest now for the tall handsome rider who was going to settle down.

"Here's the bank money, Bob," she said. "I'm sorry I ever distrusted you. I might have known all along that you were innocent."

"Shucks, nobody could blame yuh for thinkin' I was one of the gang," he said. "They didn't want to wait, because somebody else might come in the bank. So they pulled the job with me there. And Yeager woulda shot me, too, but Benson yelled at him. So I tailed 'em out of there—and got shot, anyway. I didn't have enough reputation to try and explain to the sheriff. Then I went after Yeager, and came on here—and the water came down in the draw after my hoss strayed to the other side. You know the rest."

"Yes," said Donna. "I know the rest up to now. But after this—what?"

He kissed her. "Yuh're goin' to be rich, sweetheart, when yuh find the silver vein. And I'm so poor, I—"

Donna put a finger across his lips.

"Imagine," she whispered, "finding something that's been around a long time and was never discovered! Something a lot more precious than silver!" And Bob Wiley, kissing her again, knew just what she meant.

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The Pipe of Peace

By SCOTT CARLETON

Author of "Chief Buffalo Billy Bates," "Buffalo Billy Turns Bandit," etc.

CHAPTER I

Happy Birthday

BUFFALO BILLY BATES was hunting more than camp meat as he rode his pinto along the south bank of the Yellowstone River. He removed a worn and folded letter from inside his long buckskin hunting shirt and for a moment forgot caution as he read the neatly penned lines. The last line of the letter made him chuckle.

Make peace between the Sioux and the Crows if you can, and a happy birthday to you.

Col. Wm. F. Cody.

"I'm sure getting old," the young hunter muttered to himself. "Twenty years old today. I'm going to cele-

A Complete Indian Scout Novelet

brate with a big feast before I get too blame old to chew."

In spite of his youth, Buffalo Billy Bates was a veteran of the long trails. Few white men had skill and courage to travel alone in hostile Indian country, but Billy Bates had lived among red skins ever since his birth back in old Santa Fe. It was there that Buffalo Bill Cody had found him as a child. The famous Indian scout immediately realized he had discovered an apt pupil.

Young Billy Bates' early training asserted itself as he returned the worn letter to his shirt and slid from his pinto which was pointing its ears toward a patch of wild anise close to the river.

On the ground, Buffalo Billy was six feet tall, lean of waist and wide between his powerful shoulders. His moccasined feet made no sound as he hunkered to the tall bluestem grass and fitted an arrow to the string of his chokeberry hunting bow.

Something was moving down by the water's edge, forty yards away. The young hunter's blue eyes narrowed watchfully. His right hand drew the bowstring until the feathered haft of the arrow brushed his tanned cheek.

Abruptly the head of a four-pronged buck rose nervously above the brush.

Billy Bates instantly loosed his arrow. The deer leaped high as the steel tip sped true to its mark, then fell back in the high grass.

Bates drew his skinning knife, but he waited a moment until he was sure the animal was dead. A wounded deer was dangerous to a man on foot.

Billy Bates suddenly forgot the deer, though. Without waiting, the hat was jerked from his head.

The young hunter dropped flat in the high grass and snaked his way a few paces from the place where he had made his swift dive. His eyes glowed with anger as he stared at the old campaign hat Colonel Cody had given him. An arrow was sticking through the crown and Billy Bates followed its flight with unerring accuracy.

THE grass would wave to betray his hiding place, if he tried to reach the quiver behind his left shoulder. Instead he gripped his long-bladed skinning knife. The grass had begun to stir over by a stand of sandstone rocks.

A crouching, tawny body was slipping through the grass with all the stealth of a panther. Billy Bates tensed his lean body for a leap when he saw the spread wings of a blackbird appear above the grass. A swarthy, copper-hued face lifted slowly under the spreading wings.

Billy leaped on a broad, naked back. His left forearm went under the Indian's chin and the point of his knife pressed against the struggling brave's chest.

The startled savage dropped his hunting bow and raised both grimy hands to indicate surrender. Billy Bates loosed his throat-lock and turned the Indian to face him.

His captive was tall and slender, with long, flowing muscles rippling under his smooth, dusky skin. Black eyes stared at the young white hunter without the slightest trace of fear.

"Pale-face mighty hunter," the Indian said in the Crow tongue. "Me, Chief Flying Bird, but you not count coup. Flying Bird not afraid to die."

Billy Bates returned his knife to the beaded sheath on his right hip. Then he smiled and held up his right hand in the ancient sign of peace. He told the Crow chieftain that he was not an enemy and that he had killed the young deer to celebrate his birthday. His fingers moved rapidly to count off his years, after which he invited the Indian to share in the feast.

"Me think you soldier," Chief Flying Bird said in halting English. "They come like the leaves and me see soldier's hat above the grass. Why you come to Indian country?"

Billy Bates showed no surprise at

the Indian's ability to talk English, but his eyes narrowed with understanding. The Crow tribe had fought with the United States cavalry, might even had participated in the battle of the Little Big Horn, which had resulted in the massacre of Custer's entire force.

"You knew Chief Yellow Hair?" he asked, using the Indian name for Custer.

"Chief Yellow Hair brave man," the Indian answered. "Me one of his scouts, but me escape from trap of the mighty Sioux. White men no run. White men all die. Why you come, White Snake?"

Billy Bates tensed with anger, until he remembered how he had crawled through the grass.

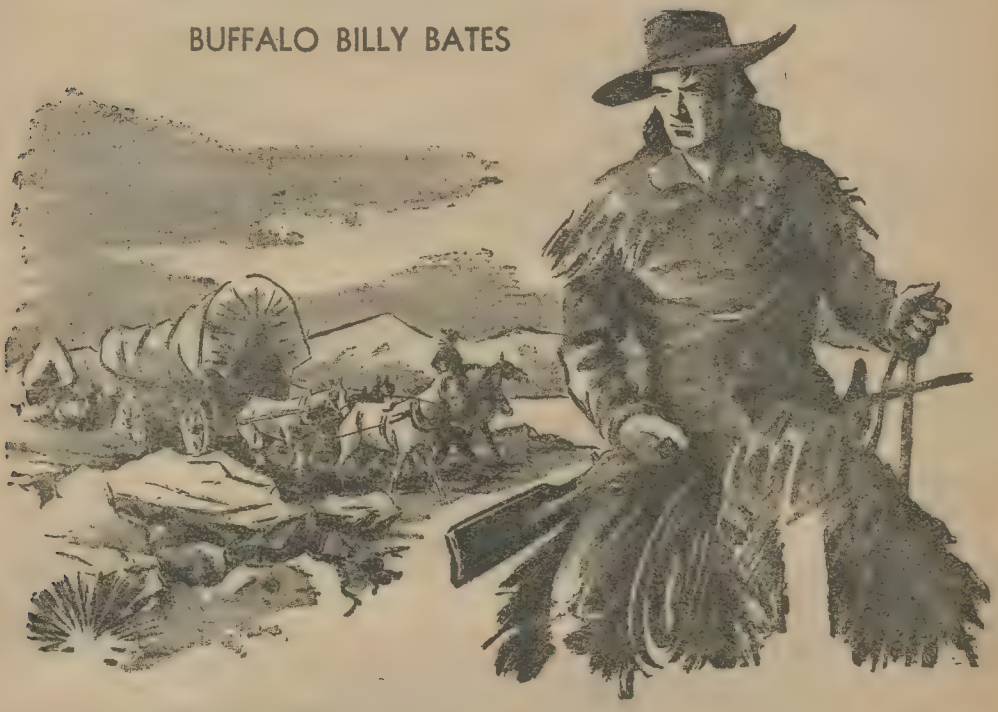
The Crow had given him a name and Billy Bates knew that from that moment on he would be known as "White Snake" as long as he remained in Montana.

"The Crow tribe is at war with the Sioux," he said slowly. "The Great White Father wants his children to live in peace."

"Many moons ago I see you. You ride with great hunter, Buffalo Bill. He your father?"

"Buffalo Bill my friend and teacher," Billy Bates answered proudly. "He great chief now and has many soldiers. He send me because he does not want to kill red brothers."

"Ugh!" Flying Bird grunted. "We kill Sioux and they kill many Crows. Chief Three Fingers evil man, but heap brave."



BILLY BATES turned his head slightly as a vagrant sound came to his sensitive ears. Then he threw his body against the Crow and sent him sprawling to the grass. Two arrows flashed across the tops of the bluestem.

"Sioux come," Flying Bird said in the sign language and began to crawl away to the left.

Billy Bates nodded and slithered through the grass to the right. He

heard the pinto horse snort back in the brush. He notched an arrow to his bowstring as he came to a clearing and ran swiftly in a crouch. He reached the thicket where he had left his horse, saw a paint-daubed Indian leap astride the pinto from the right side. Billy Bates' eyes were hot with anger as he released his arrow, for he had trained the paint horse from a colt.

The startled Sioux yelled with pain. The pinto bogged its head and arched its back, bucked twice to unseat its rider. The Indian was snapped off, but rolled like a cat when he struck the grass. He sprang to his feet with a war-cry ringing from his lips, but the scream died away in a gurgle. A winging arrow had pierced his corded throat.

Billy Bates fitted a second arrow to his bow. He whirled as racing hoofs began to pound the valley floor. A young Sioux brave was crouching low across the neck of his running horse, riding madly for his life. He was already out of range.

Billy Bates turned just as Flying Bird straightened up from the ground. The chief held a dripping knife in his sinewy right hand. Billy scowled when he saw a scalp-lock in the other. Flying Bird had counted a double coup.

He fastened the grisly trophy to the breechcloth around his lean hips.

"Young Sioux brave go to Happy Hunting Ground," he grunted without emotion. "You save Flying Bird's life, but you no kill enemy. You take hair?"

"White man no take scalps," Billy Bates answered in a flat, low voice. His face expressed his repugnance. Before Flying Bird could protest, Billy Bates drew back his bowstring and sent an arrow through the heart of a dun Indian pony. "Young brave ride to Happy Hunting Ground."

The Crow frowned with disapproval.

"Sioux try to run," he muttered. "Him show white feather like squaw."

Bates turned on his heel and made his way through the tall grass to the bank of the river. He knew it was useless to try to change the ways of the warring Indians.

His knife flashed across the throat of the dead deer to bleed the warm carcass. Making a slit up the legs of his prey, he rapidly skinned out the deer and began to quarter the carcass.

Chief Flying Bird came up and watched intently.

"Let squaws do work, White Snake," he said at last. "You ride to Crow camp with Flying Bird?"

YOUNG BATES stopped abruptly and plunged his knife into the loamy soil. He knew the Indian method of cooking and the Crows wasted nothing when they made a kill.

"White Snake want deer steak," he answered. He cut a thick steak from the partly skinned carcass, which he laid on a nest of grass. "You take deer to camp and I come there before sundown."

"It is well, my brother, but the Sioux are many," Flying Bird warned. "You find Crow camp down in the valley between the two rivers.

He wrapped the slain deer in the hide and tied the four legs together. Lifting it easily, he swung the carcass over his shoulder and stalked up the river bank. Billy Bates saw him throw it over a long-legged bay pony, mount and ride toward the north without a backward glance.

Shrugging his wide shoulers, Bates kicked a deadfall apart and gathered dry tinder for a quick fire. He knew that the smoke might attract the hostile Sioux, but he had eaten nothing but dried jerky and parched corn for two days. His nostrils twitched with anticipation when the steak began to sizzle.

Before long he was eating the juicy venison, hunter style. Holding the meat in his left hand, he fastened his

strong white teeth in the steak, then cut off the morsel close to his lips with his skinning knife. He munched parched corn between bites of the steak. Finished, he wiped his hands on the seams of his buckskin pants.

After drinking deeply from the river, he doused the coals of his fire and whistled for the pinto. Then he remembered the old campaign hat Colonel Cody had given him. He picked it up and stared at the arrow that had driven through the tough felt.

It was more than a head covering to the young hunter. Buffalo Bill Cody had worn that old hat while riding with the Nebraska militia. He had presented it to Billy after a buffalo hunt up in Wyoming. Billy Bates shook his head regretfully and tucked it under the light pack on the pinto.

"It would only rile up the redskins," he muttered, "and I came up here to make peace."

He leaped lightly to the pony's back and neck-reined with the single thong running from the squaw bridle.

Trained to read signs from every bent twig, he followed the faint marks of Flying Bird's horse across the valley. Miles of rolling grass stretched before him, with the Smoky Mountains over to the north. He passed countless buffalo skulls bleaching in the grass, showing where the great migratory herds had traveled from Canada to Mexico. Now there were only a few of the great shaggy animals left and these hid out in inaccessible canyons.

Billy Bates missed the heavy Sharps rifle he usually carried. He also missed the stout Morgan horse he used under saddle. He had left the Morgan at Fort Cody, knowing that an extra horse would prove too much of a temptation to either the Sioux or Crow Indians.

After riding for an hour, he could see a thin river of silver to the north, where the Mussel Shell River formed a natural boundary for the valley. Although it was early summer, the white-clad peaks of the Snowies rose high, with their winter garments unmelted.

Bates shaded his eyes and gazed at the foot of a low range of mountains. Fires were sending up columns of smoke. Then he detected the skin-covered tepees of the Crows.

With the wind blowing his long hair away from his deeply tanned face, Buffalo Billy Bates rode toward the council fires, where he would meet Chief Flying Bird and his young Crow braves.

CHAPTER II

Strong Medicine

BILLY BATES rode his horse up to a rise where he could study a ring of hills. He knew that the Crows would have lookouts posted on the high places. He could see down into the camp where the squaws were busy over the cooking fires. A smile quirked his lips briefly as he decided upon an entry that would make a lasting impression on the younger braves.

Tying the pinto to a spring willow, Billy Bates kept to the thicket on his way toward the camp. His only weapons were the knife at his hip and the bow and arrows in the quiver over his left shoulder. A hunting wolf could not have moved with more stealth than Bates did.

Twilight was closing in on the valley when the young white hunter flattened out on the ground near the biggest fire. The grass had not been trampled and a gentle wind waved the bluestem. Several Indian boys were guarding the horse herd within sight of their elders.

Billy Bates turned his attention to the braves gathered around the coun-

cil fire. Chief Flying Bird was talking in a low, guttural voice and was also using the sign language. He was telling his followers about his meeting with the white hunter.

Billy Bates could read the unbelief on their coppery faces.

"White Snake is a great hunter and a mighty warrior," Flying Bird declared. "He could come among us without being observed."

"Our guards would see him," an old brave argued. "Because we are at war with the Sioux, our braves watch from every hill. White Snake could not get through our lines!"

Billy Bates worked his way to the very edge of the standing grass, until he was within ten paces of the roaring fire. More than fifty warriors were squatting around the blaze, watching their chief with cold, unwavering eyes. An empty place had been reserved beside Chief Flying Bird on the other side of the fire, as though for an expected guest.

"I bring you peace, my brothers!" Buffalo Billy said in the Crow language, rising to his full height. "Chief Flying Bird has spoken with a single tongue!"

Heads jerked around and black eyes widened with astonishment. A tall, young white man stood in their very midst, his long, brown hair brushing his wide, powerful shoulders.

Billy Bates notched an arrow to his hunting bow and drew the string back. Then he sent the arrow high into the air and the startled braves watched it in flight. When Bates smiled and held his right hand out in the sign of peace, the braves looked at him with no emotion on their disciplined faces.

Every head turned swiftly as something abruptly dropped out of the twilight with a feathery *swish*. An arrow was imbedded in the ground beside Flying Bird, in the space he had reserved for his guest. It was the same arrow Billy Bates had shot into the air.

The young white hunter walked gravely to the spot and silently sat down.

A murmur of wonder ran around the circle as the startled braves stared at Billy Bates. Chief Flying Bird hid his amazement with difficulty, then simulated anger.

"Our young braves are stationed on all the high hills," he said scornfully. "Our squaws are cooking at their fires, but White Snake comes right to the council fire without being seen."

"Ugh!" a tall brave grunted. "White Snake might be spy for Sioux. We do not know him."

White Snake wounded Sioux brave with arrow," Flying Bird spoke up quickly. "Be careful how you speak, Black Bear!"

THE disgruntled brave rose to his feet, facing Billy Bates. He was naked except for breechclout and moccasins, and he was thewed like the mighty black bear for which he had been named. Huge muscles stood out on his massive shoulders as he raised his long arms. His face was hostile with jealousy.

"I do not like the crawling snake," he said with blunt contempt. "I am a mighty warrior and the Crows know I speak with the single tongue!"

Billy Bates sat quietly and nodded his head. He knew that Black Bear was about to recite a story of his bravery and prowess in battle, a story that could be verified by the other warriors around the fire.

"I killed two Sioux braves when I was so little." Black Bear pointed to his left shoulder to indicate his stature. "I count double coup when I take their scalps."

He pointed to a long hunting lance. Five scalps were tied to the shaft. Billy Bates' blue eyes began to smolder when he saw that one of the scalps was that of a white man.

Black Bear's voice grew louder as he told his story. Heads nodded to verify each detail of his prowess.

Billy realized that the climax was coming when even Chief Flying Bird leaned forward to watch the excited orator.

"My years were numbered by twenty summers when I met a black bear on a mountain trail," the powerful brave roared. "I wrestled the bear with my hands and threw the carcass over the high cliff. I have spoken, White Snake!"

Buffalo Billy stretched slowly to his feet and looked around the circle of impassive faces. Now it was his turn to tell of his might, for the Indians did not consider such a recital as boasting. Bates shook his head,

realizing that he would have no proof of his own adventures. But he also knew that news traveled fast over the frontier grapevine.

"White man does not take hair of enemy," he began in his deep, quiet voice. "Far away in the south, the Comanches make me Chief Long Hair."

"It is so," Flying Bird seconded. "My white brother speaks with the single tongue."

"My red brother, Black Bear, is a mighty warrior," Billy Bates continued thoughtfully. "He conquered the mightiest animal of them all. I have never wrestled with a black bear, but my medicine is strong." He stripped off his long hunting shirt. "White Snake will wrestle the mighty Black Bear now!"

Every head jerked around as the Indians realized that the young white hunter had challenged Black Bear to a duel of strength and cunning. They stared at the smooth, hard torso with open admiration. Long, writhing muscles covered the arms and shoulders of the white brave.

Black Bear stared at Billy Bates with a sneer of contempt twisting his lips. He would outweigh the white brave by thirty pounds and Black Bear was the tallest warrior of his tribe. He towered at least four inches above Billy Bates.

A deep rumble sounded in his swelling chest.

"Black Bear does not wrestle with boys!"

"My horse is yonder in the thicket," Billy Bates answered clearly. "I trained the pinto myself and he is the best hunting horse on the plains. I will bet him against your best horse, Black Bear. Are you afraid of White Snake?"

The Crow brave filled out his chest and smote it with his left fist. His dark face clouded with a terrible anger, but Billy Bates only smiled. The circle of braves began to move back. Bates removed his knife and handed it to Flying Bird.

"I will not kill my red brother," he promised. "I have never fought with a black bear, but I am ready!"

THE Crow brave leaped high in the air with a roar of anger bursting from his tight lips. He landed lightly on his moccasins and lunged at Billy Bates like a maddened grizzly blocking a one-way trail. But his clutching fingers closed on air.

Billy Bates had dodged like a tree-cat, going down on one knee to trip his hurtling opponent. Black Bear doubled up and rolled head over heels, but he was on his feet without stopping his roll.

He leaped forward when he saw that Billy Bates had his back half-turned to him. His long arms lashed out across the white hunter's shoul-

ders. His left arm crooked for a throat-lock, but fingers of steel closed around his wrist to break the hold.

Billy Bates pulled down with all his strength, bucking his back at the same time. The Crow warrior hurtled through the air like a side of beef. Billy Bates hung on, instead of releasing his hold on the wrist.

Black Bear had ducked his head to take a roll, but his skull thudded on the ground when his lithe body did not flip over. For a moment the Indian was stunned.

Billy Bates went into a crouch and picked Black Bear up with an ankle hold. Then he pitched the Indian to the ground like a man flailing wheat, keeping his hold on the sinewy wrist.

Black Bear crashed to the grass with the sound made by a bullwhip striking a pile of green hides. His long legs quivered spasmodically, before his limp body sagged down like a worn picket rope.

Billy dropped to his knees and placed both knees on the unconscious Indian's outstretched arms. Both arms darted out with fingers clawed for a hold. Then Bates shook his head violently. He went through the pantomime of throttling Black Bear, even fingering the long black scalp-lock, after which he leaped quickly to his feet. He held his right hand toward the staring braves in the sign of peace.

"Black Bear is a mighty warrior," he said earnestly, "but White Snake does not wait to be crushed. He strikes with deeds, not words!"

"White Snake speaks with a single tongue," Chief Flying Bird agreed soberly. "We smoke the pipe of peace."

Buffalo Billy turned when Black Bear groaned softly. The Crow was stirring slightly, and then he sat up with a jerk. He staggered as he lurched to his feet. Billy Bates steadied him with his left hand, gravely proffering his right in token of friendship.

Black Bear stared with his beady black eyes. His right arm was almost helpless. He rubbed it to restore the circulation, then gripped Billy Bates by the hand.

"Your medicine is strong, White Snake," he murmured hoarsely. "Why did you not kill Black Bear?"

"I come to make friends with my red brothers," Billy answered. "Flying Bird prepares the pipe of peace."

The chief filled a stone ceremonial pipe with tobacco and ground acorn. He lighted the pipe with a coal from the fire, took a deep pull and passed the pipe to Billy Bates. Billy filled his mouth with acrid smoke and sent three smoke rings whirling above his head. Then he passed the pipe to Black Bear, who was rubbing his throat with his left hand.

"I felt the hand of death on my throat," the Crow brave muttered. "Peace be with you, white brother." He puffed slowly, passed the pipe down the line, and spoke without turning his head. "My hunting horse is yours, White Snake. Use him well."

"I have a horse," Bates answered gravely. "I will make a trade with you, Black Bear. You have four polished claws on each side of your belt."

"They are from the forepaws of the bear I threw from the cliff," Black Bear explained in a worried voice. "They are my medicine."

"I'm not as strong as you, Black Bear," Billy said quietly. "Are we friends now?"

"Now and for all time!" the Crow answered fiercely. "Black Bear would die for White Snake!"

"I will trade you the horse for the claws on your left leg."

Black Bear stared thoughtfully into the fire. He shrugged and untied the thong that held the four claws on the left side of his belt, made them fast to the beaded sheath that held Billy's hunting knife.

"You strong now, White Snake," he declared soberly. "You are stronger than even Black Bear!"

CHAPTER III

Three Fingers Leaves his Mark

YOUNG BILLY BATES had proved himself a great warrior and had won respect from the warring Crows. When the circle broke up to go to the cooking fires, Billy spoke softly to Chief Flying Bird.

"The Sioux will attack tonight. Put out the fires and double your sentries."

"They will attack just before sunrise," Flying Bird corrected bluntly, addressing the white brave as an equal. "Sioux might try to steal our horses tonight, so we bring them close to Crow camp."

The twilight had faded in the western sky and the shadows of night blotted out all the landscape except the peaks of the higher hills.

"I will get my horse while you eat," Bates told Flying Bird. "Then we will ride to see the sentries you have posted. My medicine tells me that all is not well."

Chief Flying Bird grunted and hurried to a fire where his squaw had prepared meat from the young deer. Billy could hear the murmur of guttural voices as he retraced his steps to the thicket where he had tied the pinto.

The white hunter's eyes swiftly became adjusted to the shadowy gloom. His moccasined feet made no sound as he slipped quickly through the brush and high grass. Then he stopped suddenly, the short hairs beginning to rise at the back of his neck. It was a premonition of a danger such as comes only to those who sleep on the ground.

Billy Bates turned his ears to catch any unusual sound. A horse snorted back in the thicket. The noise of crackling brush told the listening hunter that the pinto had run out to the end of its rope.

Now Bates moved like a timber wolf, padding swiftly through the gloom toward the sound. He crouched low at the very edge of the thicket and saw a shadowy form straighten up suddenly. The pinto lunged with a snort of terror as the figure made a flying leap from the right side. Only Indians always mounted from the right.

Billy Bates dropped his chokeberry bow, for the brush prevented him from stringing an arrow. Every muscle in his body obeyed as he leaped forward to meet the lunge of the pinto, both arms spread wide. A naked, muscular body squirmed in his grip.

The horse thief broke free, tumbling from the far side of the terrified horse. Billy Bates recoiled to the side, shifting his feet like a dancer to keep his balance. His right hand went to the beaded sheath at his belt and he drew his skinning knife.

The tawny body sprang at him from the murky shadows. Billy Bates had a brief glimpse of his attacker, whose ribs were daubed with crimson and yellow ochre. The brave was a Sioux, painted for the war-path, a gleaming knife gripped in his sinewy right hand.

The Indian lunged like a panther and the heel of his left hand struck Billy Bates on the right shoulder. Billy rolled with the blow and dropped to one knee as the deadly knife drove down toward his broad chest. The point of the blade ripped his buckskin shirt, without touching the flesh.

Billy grinned at the closeness of the blow. His own knife was gripped for an upthrust and he surged to his feet just as the Sioux recovered his balance. Bates lunged forward like a steel spring, putting all his weight and strength behind the ferocious stab.

Even as he struck up with his knife, he twisted to the side to avoid the downward sweep of his enemy's blade. He heard a soft grunt of mortal pain, jerked his weapon free for another blow. It wasn't necessary. The Sioux crumpled to the grass, his life blood spurting from his punctured heart.

Billy heard the *thud* of moccasins coming at a run from the Crow camp. He called out softly to prevent a rain of arrows.

"All is well, Flying Bird. White Snake has caught a horse thief!"

He crouched low until Flying Bird and Black Bear ran to his side, following the sound of his voice. Billy Bates plunged his dripping blade into the soft earth to scour it, watched in silence as Black Bear flipped the dead Sioux over with one strong hand.

"Ho!" Black Bear grunted, but his voice expressed his excitement. "You kill heap big chief, White Snake." He lifted the dead brave's right hand. "This is Three Fingers, chief of the Sioux!"

Billy Bates stepped forward and caught Black Bear's arm as the Crow brave seized the dead Sioux chief by the scalplock.

"Do not scalp chief," he said sternly. "Three Fingers was heap brave warrior. White man does not raise hair. I have spoken, Black Bear!"

"It shall be as my white brother wishes," the Crow brave agreed reluctantly. He replaced his long-bladed knife. "You have eyes like the owl and ears like the hunting cat, White Snake."

Billy Bates grunted to acknowledge the grudging praise, and then started across the little clear in a crouch. Following a barely perceptible trail where sliding feet had bent the grass, he kept his own body down below the skyline.

Like a hound following a hot scent, Billy led the two Crows up a gentle rise, winding between small trees and clumps of brush. The trail was not difficult to follow, because the Sioux had followed the trail of Billy's pinto down to the camp of the Crows.

Billy Bates did not hesitate when he came to a little plateau overlooking the valley. He had seen the young Crow brave who had been posted as lookout by Flying Bird. He showed no surprise when he found the sentry lying on his back, staring up at the star-studded sky with sightless eyes.

Bates clicked his teeth when he saw that the young brave had been scalped. A hunting arrow had been driven all the way through the dead Indian's body between the shoulder-blades.

A FAINT crescent moon swung slowly above a high peak to flood the mesa with a pale silvery glow. Black Bear, growling angrily, was hovering over the slain Crow, pointing to a blood-smeared stain on the dead man's chest.

"Three Fingers killed him from the dark," he whispered hoarsely. "Look, White Snake!"

Bates leaned over and stared at the corpse. A bloody hand had left an unmistakable brand after scalping the luckless Crow. From that hand print, the index finger was missing.

"This brave was my brother," Black Bear murmured harshly. "Maybe he will sleep better if I find his hair!"

No emotion showed on Black Bear's savage face, except for the smoldering light that burned in his beady black eyes. Billy nodded with understanding as Black Bear started down the slope, though he knew what would happen to Chief Three Fingers. An eye for an eye was the rule of the Indians. Chief Three Fingers must be disgraced by mutilation when he appeared before the Great Spirit in the Happy Hunting Ground.

"Let us make medicine, White Snake," Chief Flying Bird said to Billy Bates. "We are outnumbered by the Sioux. They would have surprised our camp if you had not dis-

covered the treacherous Three Fingers."

"You have seen the prairie fire, oh, Chief," Bates said quietly. "What do you do when the fire cannot be stopped?"

"Fight fire with fire," Flying Bird answered promptly. "We start back fires!"

"You have spoken," Billy answered, and proved himself a natural diplomat. "Your medicine is good, Flying Bird. We will steal the horses of the Sioux!"

"Let us return to our camp."

Buffalo Billy Bates made no answer. He leaned over the dead brave and lifted the body to his shoulder with ease. Flying Bird stared for a moment, turned on his heel and led the way through the pale moonlight.

Billy avoided the thicket where he had tied his pinto. Flying Bird would bring his horse down to the camp and Bates did not want to see the results of Black Bear's anger. There would be no ghost horse for Three Fingers to ride on his swift journey to where his fathers had gone before him.

Bates paused as he left the thicket on his way toward the camp in the valley. He could hear the soft wailing of the squaws, which could mean only one thing. Black Bear had finished his work and had reported the death of his young brother.

Not a fire was glowing to betray the location of the camp to hostile eyes. A tall brave appeared suddenly, spoke in a whisper as Billy Bates entered the camp and lowered his burden to the ground.

"My brother will sleep now," Black Bear murmured. "I knew White Snake would honor him and me by carrying him here for the squaws to prepare him for his long sleep."

Billy straightened slowly and glanced at a fresh scalp hanging from Black Bear's belt. He turned his head away while Black Bear knelt beside his brother, but not before he had seen the big brave place something on the bleeding head. When Black Bear again rose to his towering height, the scalp-lock of his brother was once more in place.

"As soon as Flying Bird come to camp, we go to attack Sioux," Black Bear muttered savagely, fingering the handle of his knife.

CHIEF FLYING BIRD appeared at the edge of the thicket, leading Billy's pinto. He nodded at sight of the scalp hanging from Black Bear's belt. Then he came closer and spoke in a low voice.

"Get Running Bird, Wild Horse and Little Fox," he told Black Bear. "Bring them to me. Tell them to get their fastest horses. "You, White Snake and I will make a raid on the Sioux when the moon gets low. We will steal their horses, and when daylight comes, we can destroy the tribe."

"Maybe we can make peace," Billy Bates suggested shrewdly. "The Sioux are mighty warriors and their numbers are many."

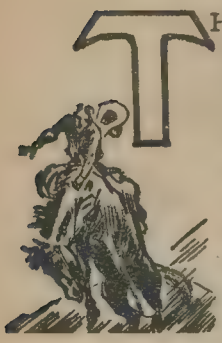
"Sioux will not make peace," Flying Bird contradicted positively. "They know Crows were scouts for the white warrior, Chief Yellow Hair. Sioux killed every white man on the Little Big Horn and only the Crows escape. Sioux will never make peace with Crows!"

Billy Bates sighed. He remembered the massacre of Custer's men—six thousand Indians against less than three hundred white men. All the soldiers had died, but they had exacted a fearful penalty from the savage Sioux under the leadership of Sitting Bull. "Colonel Cody sent me to make peace," Billy Bates said stubbornly. "I will do my best!"

Chief Flying Bird did not answer, for he too, was stubborn. He turned to the three picked braves who rode up, leading horses for Black Bear and himself. He mounted his horse, spoke briefly to the three young braves, then led the way toward a red glow against the southern sky..

CHAPTER IV

The Stampede



THE pale crescent moon faded out behind a distant peek of the Snowy Mountains. Six mounted men rode silently through the young night, keeping below the cover of the timber line. The unshod feet of their horses were muffled by the short grass.

Chief Flying Bird stopped with a soft grunt as he pointed to the distant fires of the Sioux.

"Sioux make big feast," he said with evident satisfaction. "The young braves wait for Chief Three Fingers to return, while the older warriors follow Chief Gray Wolf."

"You mean they have two chiefs?" Billy Bates asked.

A frown crossed his face. With Three Fingers dead, he had hoped to make peace through the medicine man of the tribe.

Flying Bird noticed his disappointment.

"Gray Wolf is an old man now," he explained. "If we can steal their horses, the Sioux cannot escape."

Billy Bates stared at the distant fires, a plan beginning to take form in his mind. One man might get through the sentry lines of the Sioux, whereas a greater number would surely be discovered. He turned to Flying Bird and outlined his plan.

"It will be dark very soon. The warriors around the fires will be heavy with food and they will sleep while they wait for the return of Three Fingers."

Flying Bird nodded and hefted his long hunting lance.

Black Bear fingered his sharp-bladed knife, his beady eyes studying the face of the young white hunter. Grunts of disapproval came from the other three Crows as Billy Bates continued talking.

"I will ride into the camp of the Sioux when the moon grows dark. The Sioux will not see me, but I will stampede their horses. My Crow brothers will wait in the valley of the Yellowstone, where I met Chief Flying Bird, and I will signal to you with three calls of the wolf."

"That is the call of their old chief, Gray Wolf," Flying Bird agreed eagerly. "The old warriors will follow you and we shall kill them."

Billy smiled knowingly in the darkness. He wanted to avoid a massacre and the Sioux Indians would not continue the pursuit without their horses. Buffalo Billy Bates would see to it that most of the Sioux would be foot soldiers.

He told Flying Bird of his plans, wisely letting the Crow Chief give orders to his braves. Some of the Sioux sentries would have to be disposed of, but Flying Bird had picked his men well. Though Wild Horse and Little Fox listened attentively, Black Bear and Running Bird turned their faces away.

"I go with White Snake," Black Bear growled sullenly.

Bates skinned off his hunting shirt and fastened his long hair under the beaded head-band. His chokeberry bow was in the quiver over his left shoulder, his keen knife fast in the sheath at his belt. The night wind was chill against his bare skin, but Billy Bates would pass for an Indian in the darkness.

"I go now," he said to Flying Bird, and hooked his knees under the rope which ran beneath the belly of his pinto. "I will give the call of the wolf when the horse herd starts running."

Black Bear remained silent as Billy Bates rode into the darkness.

The distance was about three miles to the camp of the Sioux. Several times Billy Bates stopped to listen. Almost certain that he was being followed, he slipped to the ground

when he came to a motte of scrub oak.

A moment later the unmistakable sound of a walking horse came down the wind to his keen ears. Billy Bates fitted an arrow to his bow, faced his back trail. His eyes were grim with anger as a tall brave rode down the slope, skylined for a moment against the high crest of the mesa.

For a brief instant Billy was tempted to send an arrow into the heart of the walking horse. The brave was Black Bear and his wide shoulders would make an inviting target if some watchful Sioux sentry were lurking in the brush.

Even as Bates hesitated, Black Bear disappeared behind a thick screen of brush. Then his voice came whispering down the night wind.

"Do not shoot, White Snake. I have come to help you!"

Billy Bates sighed and loosened his bowstring. Black Bear had obviously discovered his hiding place, for he rode into the clearing without hesitation and came directly to Billy Bates.

"I will watch campfires while you crawl on your belly through the grass," Black Bear offered gravely. "If old braves wake up, Black Bear will stop them while you steal horses. I have spoken!"

Buffalo Billy nodded sullenly. Now that Black Bear had spoken, nothing would change the Crow warrior's mind. All would be well if he remained in the darkness beyond the Sioux fires, however.

Billy Bates mounted his pinto and started slowly down the gentle slope. Black Bear touched his arm as they came to the base of a rising knoll. Something moved on the peak of the knoll.

Black Bear notched an arrow to his bow. A head rose slowly, and then the outline of a feather was etched against the faint crimson glow of the distant fires.

The flat *twang* of a bowstring vibrated on the still night air before Billy Bates could speak. He heard a low, startled grunt. The brush began to crackle, and abruptly the body of the Sioux sentry tumbled almost at the feet of the two snorting horses.

Black Bear slid from his horse with the knife in his right hand. He remounted almost instantly. Billy Bates clicked his teeth angrily when he saw the grisly trophy in Black Bear's left hand. The Crow brave had counted double coup.

He spoke softly with a note of triumph in his deep, guttural voice.

"The way is clear now, White Snake. I can hear the horses blowing."

He pointed to the left with his chin. Billy Bates slid from the pinto and handed the single rein to Black Bear. Then he doubled over and disappeared in the high grass without making the slightest sound.

The horse band was grazing on the valley floor near the river, where Billy Bates had shot his deer. He could see two Indian riders guarding the herd, half-grown boys who had not yet earned the right to ride with the warriors. They would earn that right if he became careless.

Billy Bates raised a moistened finger to test the wind. He nodded when he discovered that the wind was blowing toward him from the valley, which was why the horses had not yet discovered his presence.

ONE of the night herders was slumped over on his horse almost at the water's edge. Billy Bates drew a deep breath and began to inch slowly through the waving grass.

Something round and hard pressed against his naked chest. The blood began to hum through his veins when he bent to pick up a small, worn boulder.

Almost within jumping distance of the dozing sentry, Billy Bates drew back his right arm. He threw the rock and jumped at the same time. He caught the dragging rope and the In-

dian toppled from his horse with a low grunt of pain.

Bates ran beside the startled horse and vaulted lightly to the animal's bare back. Three wailing notes pealed from his lips as he circled the horse band and drove them toward the hills.

The remaining herder screamed a warning as the stampeding horses swept him aside. His yell was drowned in the roar of thundering hoofs. Then the young Indian saw Billy Bates coming up fast on the stolen Indian pony. He drew his skinning knife and cut in at an angle to intercept the rider.

The young white hunter, guiding the Indian pony with knee pressure, loosed an arrow with a sigh of regret. He aimed high to wound the young Sioux, but he stared with amazement when the Indian hurtled from his racing horse.

Another rider galloped out of the brush to swing the stampeding herd. Billy recognized the wide shoulders of Black Bear and then he saw his pinto running by the Crow warrior's side. Now he knew why the young Sioux had plummeted so suddenly from his horse. Black Bear had strung an arrow of his own, and the burly Crow never threw off his shots.

Black Bear slowed down his horse when Bates galloped alongside. Timing his jump perfectly, Buffalo Billy Bates changed horses just as the racing pinto leaned toward him. There was no time for talk. He fell back to ride on the left side of the thundering herd.

Billy Bates gave the cry of the hunting wolf. An answering cry floated up from the river valley. A horse raced out of the brush. Flying Bird hung on the offside until he was sure he had been recognized. After that he quartered in to meet Bates. Then the other Crows came from hiding places to keep the horses running.

"Gray Wolf, he has come!" Flying Bird shouted above the din. "We shall kill Gray Wolf and his braves!"

Billy looked across the running horses and gradually dropped back. Black Bear and the other three Crows would keep the stolen horses moving. They would not discover the absence of Flying Bird and the white hunter until it was too late.

Bates slowed his horse to a walk and untied the rope which ran under the belly of his horse. Then he made a running loop for a lasso while Flying Bird watched curiously.

"Gray Wolf is a mighty chief," Buffalo Billy explained. "We take him prisoner and save many lives."

"We will kill!" Flying Bird contradicted savagely. "My medicine is strong and I will wear Gray Wolf's scalp on my hunting lance!"

"The great White Father sent me to make peace, not war," Billy Bates answered sternly. "The Sioux have but few horses and they cannot escape. We take Gray Wolf prisoner, or I will warn him!"

CHIEF FLYING BIRD began to mutter with anger and make little jabbing thrusts with his long lance. The horse herd was far ahead when at last the Crow chief nodded his head and stopped his horse.

"We take him prisoner," he agreed grudgingly. "Maybe later we will burn Gray Wolf at the stake. How will you catch Sioux chief?"

"I will hide in that thicket yonder," Billy Bates explained, pointing to a tangle of heavy brush. "You will wait until he gets close enough to see you, and then ride slowly to make him think you are wounded."

Flying Bird stared at the lasso and gripped his lance. He did not speak, but Billy knew what would happen if he missed with his rawhide rope.

He urged his pinto into the brush when the clatter of hoofs came from the valley. Flying Bird sent his horse ahead at a slow lope.

Peering through the buckthorn, Bates saw a tall rider on a galloping spotted horse. The rider threw back

his head and howled into the night like a wolf when he discovered Chief Flying Bird.

Billy Bates drew back his arm. His own horse stood as though carved from granite. Billy Bates began to sway his body in perfect rhythm with Gray Wolf's horse, and suddenly the noose shot from his hand like a hissing snake. He jerked back with all his strength.

The rope circled over the Sioux chief's gray head and snugged tight around his long, thin arms. The spotted horse snorted with fright and plunged ahead. Billy was pulled from his pinto when Gray Wolf tumbled to the grass with a crashing *thud*.

Billy Bates landed on his moccasined feet and kept the rope tight. Gray Wolf was stirring feebly when the white hunter reached him. Bates went to his knees and finished tying him up just as Flying Bird raced back to lend a hand.

"I hope you would miss with rope," Flying Bird grunted.

Slowly he lowered his lance, disappointment showing on his coppery features.

"We will take him back to the council fire," Billy said quietly. "Gray Wolf is an old man, but he is a brave warrior."

"Three Fingers!" a wavering voice retorted thickly. "He will lead the young Sioux braves and they are many in number. Three Fingers wants war!"

"Three Fingers has gone to the Happy Hunting Ground," Billy Bates told the Sioux chief. "Now that you are a prisoner, the Sioux have no chief. We will make medicine at the council fire of the Crows."

Gray Wolf made no answer as his hands were tied behind his back and he was lifted to the back of the pinto. Mounting behind the aged Sioux, Bates nodded at Flying Bird and started for the Crow camp which was lying on the banks of the Mussel Shell.

CHAPTER V

White Snake Reports

IT LACKED an hour before the gray light of dawn when Billy Bates and Chief Flying Bird approached the Crow camp. A young brave galloped out to meet them, furiously drumming the ribs of his racing horse with the heels of his moccasined feet.

"Black Bear thought you and White Snake were captured!" the young warrior cried to Flying Bird. "Black Bear has led our braves and they will attack the Sioux just before dawn!"

The old Sioux chief sighed and shook his head.

"Many braves will die before a new day is born, White Snake," he said with simple dignity. "They will meet in the valley between the two rivers and the squaws will bury the dead."

"The Great White Father sent me to make peace between the Crows and the Sioux," Billy Bates answered firmly. "If Flying Bird also wants peace, give me your promise not to attempt an escape. I will release you and we will ride together into the valley of the Yellowstone."

Chief Flying Bird frowned, but watched the Sioux chief in silence. Gray Wolf studied the face of Billy Bates and slowly nodded his gray head.

"I speak with the single tongue, White Snake," he said slowly and with dignity. "Gray Wolf will not run away."

Billy Bates jerked the thongs that bound the aged chief and gave an order to the young Crow warrior. The brave slid from his horse and offered it to Gray Wolf. The old Sioux chief mounted from the right side like a boy.

"You have a plan, White Snake?" asked Flying Bird.

Buffalo Billy nodded and touched the string of wampum beads that was fastened to Gray Wolf's belt.

"Give me the wampum of peace, Gray Wolf," he requested quietly. "I will ride like the wind to the battlefield. You and Chief Flying Bird follow my flight. Your warriors are without leaders. Flying Bird will ride among the Crows, while Gray Wolf will join the Sioux. I ride alone to carry a message of peace."

His heels lightly kicked the ribs of his pinto as he finished speaking. The

two chiefs watched him until he disappeared in the darkness.

"My braves will kill White Snake," Gray Wolf said mournfully. "His hair will be carried on a hunting lance before the sun god shows his face."

"Sioux talks with his mouth," Flying Bird answered scornfully. "White Snake has heap strong medicine and the Sioux will never see him. We ride now, Gray Wolf."

Billy Bates stretched out along the neck of his horse as the fleet animal sped through the black, velvety night. The Sioux would be in a murderous rage because their horses had been stolen. They would be sure to exact a blood vengeance for the loss of their two chiefs.

On the other hand, Black Bear would lead his mounted Crow warriors against the Sioux, believing that Flying Bird and White Snake had been captured. The Crows would strike just before daylight, riding around the Sioux in ever-narrowing circles.

THE heart of Billy Bates was heavy as he thought about his mission of peace. He urged the pinto to an even swifter pace with hand and heels. The brush whipped cruelly against his naked back.

The false dawn was fighting against the curtains of night when Billy heard the shrill war-cry of the Crows. The sound came from the deep valley far below.

Knowing that the false dawn would last but a few moments, Billy sent the pinto racing at full speed down the steep, grassy slope. He rode with his knees under the rope which passed beneath the belly of his horse, while his hands were busy with a steel-tipped hunting arrow.

The shadows of night were giving way before the gray light of the false dawn when Billy Bates slowed his pinto and rode out on a little ridge which jutted above the valley. The Sioux were making a stand in a thicket of brush. Their harsh war-cries shrilled defiance at their enemies.

Out in the broad grassy valley, the Crow warriors were riding around the Sioux in a tightening circle. Bates could make out the powerful shoulders of Black Bear as he led the Crows.

The air was thick with a flight of arrows.

The false dawn would hold for perhaps ten minutes, after which darkness would again envelop the valley until the sun slanted above the Snowies to begin a new day.

Billy Bates fitted the long, slender arrow to his chokeberry bow. The wampum of peace was cleverly fastened to the shaft just below the feathers.

The muscles in Billy's shoulders

began to writhe like snakes as he drew the bowstring taut. The arrow was pointed upward.

It whined away like an angry hornet when Billy opened his sinewy fingers. He threw back his head and howled like a wolf while the arrow was in flight. Three screaming barks burst from his lips and echoed over the valley, where the circle of Crows was growing more narrow.

Billy saw Black Bear jerk his horse to a walk. The beleaguered Sioux recognized the cry of their chief and for a moment all activity ceased on both sides. Then a murmur of wonder vibrated from hundreds of throats when an arrow appeared suddenly from the gray skies and struck the ground point-first. The slender shaft quivered and came to rest.

A running Sioux broke from the brush and ran to pick up the arrow. Caught in the spell of suspense, the Crows held their fire to learn the meaning of the message.

"Gray Wolf sends the wampum of peace!" the Sioux brave shouted and held the arrow out for all to see. "Our chief is alive!"

"White Snake lives!" Black Bear shouted to the Crows. "None but White Snake could direct his arrow with such cunning. His medicine is strong!"

Even as he spoke, the false dawn faded before the curtains of the dying night. The battle would be resumed at daybreak and the two chiefs were racing against time.

Billy Bates turned his pinto and rode along the shelf until he came to the slope leading into the valley. The blood was pumping swiftly through his veins as he watched the towering peak of the Smoky Mountains. He reached the valley floor just as the sun tipped over the saw-toothed ridge.

WITH the coming of the sun, Black Bear screamed his war-cry for the attack. The Sioux answered defiantly. Arrows began to fill the air. Every moment was precious now.

Billy Bates howled like a hunting wolf. The pinto flashed out from the brush before the ringing cry had died away. The Crows recognized the white warrior, who now became a target for every Sioux arrow.

Buffalo Billy Bates judged the range and slowed his horse to a walk. His right hand was extended in the sign of peace as he rode fearlessly toward the Sioux braves hiding in the brush thicket. And as he rode, Billy knew that he was riding to his death, unless Gray Wolf and Flying Bird won their race against time.

A few steps more and he would be within range of the Sioux arrows. Bates sat erect, but his keen ears were tuned to catch the slightest sound. Just as an arrow whizzed by his head, the cry of the Gray Wolf rose clear above the clatter of racing hoofs.

Billy Bates stopped the pinto and turned to face the mouth of the valley. Chief Flying Bird was riding side by side with Chief Gray Wolf and they split apart to sandwich Billy between their sweating horses. Both Indian leaders were making the sign of peace to their followers.

The Sioux were the first to come sullenly from their coverts in the brush. Chief Flying Bird knew that his only advantage was due to the fact that his warriors were mounted, for the Sioux outnumbered the Crows four to one.

Flying Bird motioned for his braves to hold their position. White Snake would have his chance to fulfill his mission, but if the white man failed, the truce with Gray Wolf would be at an end.

Billy Bates dismounted and squatted solemnly. Gray Wolf and Flying Bird followed his example, while the scowling Sioux formed a circle around the three leaders. When all was quiet, Billy stretched slowly to his feet.

"I bring you greetings from the

Great White Father," he began in a clear, ringing voice. "All the Indians are his children and he wants you to dwell in peace. Your beef issue will be increased if you go back to your reservations. The horses of the Sioux will be returned to them."

"Horses belong to Crow," Flying Bird interrupted.

"Crow killed Chief Three Fingers," Gray Wolf said quietly, but a brief smile flitted across his weathered features. "Three Fingers killed Crow brave." He shrugged his stooping shoulders. "Are you satisfied, Flying Bird?"

Flying Bird glanced at Billy Bates and his beady black eyes narrowed when the white hunter held out a stone pipe. Flying Bird then glanced at Gray Wolf and the Sioux chief nodded his gray head. He took a pouch of tobacco and birch from his belt, handed it to Flying Bird. The Crow chief gravely filled the stone bowl.

Bates struck a spark with flint and steel and Flying Bird puffed the tobacco to flame. He passed it to Gray Wolf and the Sioux Chief filled his lungs with pungent smoke. After three puffs he passed the pipe to Billy Bates.

"White Snake is a great chief," he said.

BILLY BATES puffed slowly and sent three smoke rings whirling above his head. Then he beckoned to Black Bear, and the big Crow warrior raced his horse across the short grass.

"Black Bear is also a great warrior, my brothers," he told the two chiefs, handing the pipe to the tall brave. "You will smoke the pipe of peace with your Sioux brothers."

Black Bear took the pipe, but he scowled at the circle of watching Sioux. He hesitated for a moment. While he paused uncertainly, the clear, sweet notes of a bugle rang across the valley.

Billy Bates whirled on his heel, facing the shelf from which he had shot his message of peace into the air. A tall white man sat a white horse on the edge of the shelf. Beside him a trooper held the floating Stars and Stripes.

Billy Bates clicked his heels and saluted reverently.

"It's Buffalo Bill himself!" he shouted. "It's Colonel Bill Cody!"

Black Bear carried the pipe of peace to his lips and inhaled deeply. Then he passed the pipe to the nearest Sioux and the Crows rode up to join in the ceremony.

A long column of United States cavalry rode slowly into the valley just as the pipe returned to the hand of Flying Bird. Colonel Cody rode in the lead with his color bearer. The carbines of the soldiers were snugged down in their saddle-boots.

Buffalo Bill dismounted, faced the Indians and saluted Billy Bates.

"I gave you a mission, White Snake," he said with a smile. "You will make your report."

Billy Bates showed his astonishment when Buffalo Bill called him by the name the Crows had given him. He didn't know that the frontier grapevine had spread that name throughout the West.

Reaching under the light pack on the back of his pinto, Billy drew out the old campaign hat and pulled it down firmly over his long brown hair. Then he brought his mocassined heels together and saluted smartly.

"Scout Buffalo Billy Bates reporting to Colonel Cody, sir. I have the honor to report that the war between the Sioux and the Crows is over."

"He has spoken with a single tongue," Gray Wolf said to Buffalo Bill. "White Snake has made peace between us."

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Next Issue: IN OLD ARIZONA—*Featuring Buffalo Billy Bates*

WESTERN-aire?
1 NAME THE GROUP OF MEN, FAMOUS AS "THE GUARDSMEN OF THE SOUTHWEST," WHO DROVE THE OUTLAWS FROM OKLAHOMA?
2 FROM WHAT POINT IN THE WEST CAN SEVEN DIFFERENT STATES BE SEEN?
3 DURING THE DAYS OF THE OLD WEST WHAT WAS CALLED WEARING YOUR PISTOL "RUSTLER STLYE"?
4 WHO WAS CALLED THE UNSUNG HEROINE OF THE ALAMO?
5 WHAT BECAME OF BOB FORD AFTER THE JAMES BOYS DIED?
6 WHY WAS CHIEF "BLACK KETTLE" SO FAMOUS IN THE HISTORY OF THE OLD WEST?

The answers are on page 96—U YOU must look!

Gunsmoke for a Waddy

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Colt Crusade," "Desert of Doom," etc.

Solitaire Stevens Shows a Cowtown How to Prod a Dead Man into Telling Tales—and a Live Outlaw into Talking Himself to Death!

CHAPTER I

Inhabited Ghost Town

THERE was something sinister about the silence that brooded over the little cowtown. To "Solitaire" Stevens it seemed like the hush before a violent storm. He stood at the bar of the Four Aves Saloon, talking casually to Jed Higgins, the bartender.

"Yes, sir," said the stout man behind the bar as he wiped the counter with a damp rag, "Pay-strike shore is an interestin' place after dark. That old ghost town ain't but three miles from here, neither." He looked speculatively at Stevens, then nodded with conviction. "Yuh oughta ride out there and look the place over. It's right spooky on a night like this."

The Whistling Waddy

"Mebbe I don't even like ghost towns." There was a faint smile on the lean, strong face of the tall, dark-haired man who was known throughout the rangeland as the Whistling Waddy. "Why should I ride out there?"

He was growing curious. For the past ten minutes Higgins had been talking excitedly about the old ghost town and insisting that Solitaire visit the place tonight. Stevens was beginning to wonder if the bartender did not have an ulterior motive in making the suggestion.

"Aw, I was just thinkin' yuh might like it," said Higgins disgustedly. "I don't care—"

He broke off abruptly, a startled expression on his fat face as guns roared out in the street.

The Whistling Waddy dashed to the swinging doors, swift hands flash-

A COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET

Solitaire clipped the man with just enough force to stun him

ing to heavy Colts in his holsters as he pushed through the batwings. A quick glance told him what was happening the instant his bootheels thudded on the plank walk.

Down the street four horsemen were tall shadows in the starlight. One of them held the reins of a riderless pinto. A man dashed out of the Cattlemen's Bank with a bundle in his arms. Behind him loomed a second man.

"Stop them!" shouted the man in the doorway, metal gleaming as he raised his gun. "Bank robbery!"

Flame licked at the night as two of the mounted men fired. Almost at the same moment that their guns roared, there was the dull *smack* of lead tearing into flesh. The man in the doorway pitched forward on his face.

"The dirty sidewinders!" growled Solitaire Stevens.

His Colts boomed as he fired at the mounted men. He saw one of them stagger and knew that the rider had been hit. The man with the bundle hastily passed it to one of the men in the saddle, then swung into the kak on the pinto.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted. "Let's go!"

THEY swung their horses and rode toward the Whistling Waddy in a body, guns blazing as they drew closer. Stevens triggered his Colts with all possible speed, but he was only one against five. He realized the odds were too great for any man.

A bullet grazed his right shoulder, another tore through the crown of his hat, while a third slug nicked a bootheel. He leaped back through the swinging doors of the saloon. Lead rattled against the wood, tore through the doors and thudded against the bar beyond.

From door and windows along the street came shouts and the thunder of guns as the citizens of Hilltown went into action. Faced by concerted action, the bank robbers dug spurs to their mounts and roared out of town.

"Trouble with this town is that it's too peaceful," said Solitaire as he calmly reloaded his hot guns and thrust them back into leather. He looked at the bartender, who still stood motionless behind the bar. "Yuh better move around, Higgins. Yuh stand that way too long and yuh'll take root."

"Five men shootin' at yuh, and yuh're kickin' about this town bein' too quiet!" muttered Higgins. He stared with new respect at the tall man dressed in worn range clothes. "It's a wonder yuh ain't dead."

At the sound of excited voices out in the street, the Whistling Waddy realized that the townsmen were rounding up a posse. He yawned, but he was watching Higgins narrowly, without appearing to do so.

"Reckon I will ride out and look over that ghost town yuh been tellin' me about," he said languidly. "Might be interestin' at that."

"No, yuh wouldn't like it," objected Higgins hurriedly. "That place ain't so much. I was jest talkin'. Yuh don't want to go there."

Hoofs drummed in the street as the posse dashed out of town. Apparently the citizens of Hilltown had not realized that one man had been battling the bank robbers alone from in front of the saloon, for the little cowtown grew quiet as the hoofbeats faded into the distance.

"Yuh kind of remind me of a weather vane," said Stevens to the bartender. "First yuh want me to go to this ghost town, and then yuh don't." He smiled sardonically. "Yuh talk too blame much, Higgins."

He began to whistle softly as he walked to the door. The stout barkeeper shuddered. There was something ominous in the plaintive tune that issued from the lips of the Whistling Waddy.

Half an hour later Solitaire reined his roan at the edge of the old ghost town. Suddenly tense and wary, he

sat motionless in the saddle, staring at the ramshackle buildings that were black blotches in the shadows of the night.

"Plumb certain I seen a light in one of them buildings," muttered the Whistling Waddy. "But it's gone now."

From one of the dark buildings a gun suddenly roared. Solitaire Stevens slid out of the saddle unharmed, hands flashing to the guns on his hips even before he hit the ground. The Colts were out, ready for action, the second he landed and leaped back into the deep shadow of overhanging tree branches.

"Don't look like that shot was meant for me at that," he muttered. "Bullet didn't come this way, far as I could tell. Oh, so that's it! Reckon that hombre was doin' the shootin'."

At the far end of the long, deserted street, a horseman loomed into view. He was riding low in the saddle, urging his mount along at a gallop. He appeared to be in considerable hurry about something.

SOLITAIRE aimed his right-hand gun at the fleeing man, but a quick thought made him lower it again. The range was too great for accurate six-gun shooting and the Whistling Waddy was not anxious to attract attention to himself as yet.

"Reckon I better find out more about this before I go throwin' lead regardless," he decided. "Them bank robbers jest might be hidin' out here. Shore would like to know why Higgins was so anxious to get me to ride out here and then changed his mind."

He left the roan ground-hitched beneath the trees and edged his way forward, moving silently and keeping in the shadows as much as possible. He reached the first of the buildings at the lower end of the street and paused for a moment, looking the place over.

Ten years ago Pay-strike had been bustling with activity, but since the mines had ceased to produce, the citizens had moved away from the little mining town. Now there was nothing left but the single street, lined with bleak and deserted buildings.

"Shore looks like the place has been empty for years," mused Solitaire. "But no ghost fired that shot and hightailed it away."

He dropped his guns into the holsters and walked on along the street. He paused in front of a big building that obviously had at one time been the most important saloon in the town. One of the swinging doors was missing. The other sagged like the wing of a wounded bird as it hung half off its hinges. Beyond the entrance, Solitaire caught a faint gleam of light.

He entered cautiously and found that he was in a big barroom. An oil lantern with its wick turned low stood on the bar.

His tall figure cast eerie shadows on the walls as he approached the light. The grim hush of death lingered over the saloon. Alert for danger, the Whistling Waddy kept one hand close to the butt of a gun as he reached out and turned up the wick of the lamp.

The light grew brighter, but even its glow was not enough to penetrate the pools of blackness that still clung to the far corners of the big room. The Whistling Waddy's keen blue eyes glanced around swiftly, came to rest on the whiskey bottle and the two empty glasses near the oil lamp. The bottle was half-full and uncorked. The glasses had left rings that were still wet on the surface of the rough pine bar. Two people had recently taken a drink together here in this old ghost town saloon.

"Reckon that pair must have known each other right well," said Stevens thoughtfully. "Then they might have got into an argument and started shootin'." The lean, dark-haired man paused, frowning puzzledly. "But where is the other jasper?"

He glanced at the far end of the counter, stiffened. Sticking out from the lower corner of the bar was a limp hand. The Whistling Waddy cursed under his breath. He had found the other man.

He went to the end of the bar and stood looking down at the figure that was sprawled on the grimy floor. It was a gray-haired man, dressed in worn range clothes. He had fallen so that his face lay in the dust of years.

The Whistling Waddy rolled the body over, moving it until it was completely hidden in back of the bar. Protected from possible prying eyes, he stared down at the corpse. The man had been shot in the head and had evidently died instantly, for his old single action Colt was still in its holster.

"Downed him without even givin' him a chance to draw," snarled Solitaire. "Killed by somebody he knew, all right. I—"

He broke off and listened in amazement. From somewhere in the distance he had heard the sound of a woman sobbing.

CHAPTER II

Accused of Murder

STANDING there in the shadows of the old saloon in the supposedly deserted ghost town, a dead man at his feet, the Whistling Waddy felt there was something weird about those sobs that he heard. A sensation of growing danger stole over him, yet he was not afraid. He had encountered danger often enough to know that fear only increased it.

He was a strange sort of individual, a wanderer who refused to work for any of the ranchers he knew. Many cattlemen would have been glad to hire him, for Solitaire Stevens was known to be a top-hand and had a reputation as a superb bronco-buster. But he preferred to ride the range from the Mexican border to the remote sections of the north, always whistling and always alone.

The man was an enigma to all who knew him. Even though he occasionally rode the owlhoot trails, he was never an outlaw. Exceedingly dangerous when aroused, he was a cool-headed, ruthless gun-fighter, but he invariably refrained from going into action without good cause.

The sobbing ceased before he could be sure of the exact direction from which the sound had come. He knew he had to search for the woman who had been sobbing, that he would not be satisfied until he found her, but his first job was to learn the identity of the dead man.

He knelt beside the corpse, searching the pockets in the blue flannel shirt and in the worn levis the dead man wore. He found a handful of small change and four silver dollars, but it was a worn bank book that interested him the most. The account was in the name of Adam Wade and it was on the Cattlemen's Bank in Hilltown.

"Heard some of the men in Hilltown mention Adam Wade," muttered the Whistling Waddy. "He owned the biggest spread in this part of the country—the Flyin' W. Feller learns a lot when he hangs around a cowtown for a couple of days, like I been doin'."

Solitaire's eyes narrowed as he leafed through the bankbook and saw that Adam Wade had withdrawn five thousand dollars from the bank that day.

"That shore is a heap of *dinero* in any man's language," said Stevens. "And Adam Wade ain't got that money on him now. I begin to smell polecat and it's walkin' on two feet and carryin' a gun."

He dropped the bankbook into his

own pocket, but replaced the small change where he had found it in the pockets of the dead man. Just as he finished, he heard the drumming of horses' hoofs out in the street of the ghost town. The thudding grew louder, saddle leather creaked and bit chains jingled as a group of riders reined up in front of the saloon.

"Might be them bank robbers aimin' to hole up here," thought Solitaire quickly. "Or mebbe the posse lookin' for them."

He realized that either way he was trapped here in the saloon with the dead man. There was only a front entrance and it was impossible for him to get out that way without being seen. He ducked down behind the bar, out of sight of the men who entered. He had already made sure that the body of Adam Wade was well hidden.

"Somebody's been here, Chief," said a gruff voice as men trooped into the saloon. "Mebbe we better take a look around."

"Never mind," answered the voice of another man. "I know why that lantern is burning. There ain't nobody here. Hide the money we got from the bank, Slim, and let's keep movin'. That posse is hot on our trail."

THERE was the *creak* of a loose board being drawn up, then pounded down again. Behind the bar Solitaire waited tensely, his guns ready in his hands.

"That liquor shore looks good," said one of the outlaws hopefully. "How about a quick drink, Chief?"

"Leave that red-eye alone," snarled the leader.

"Posse comin'!" shouted a man who had been left on guard out in the street. "Get ridin'!"

"Hold it, gents." The Whistling Waddy suddenly loomed above the bar, a gun in either hand. "You jaspers ain't goin' no place."

Four men, bandanna masks hiding the lower part of their faces, whirled toward him. All of them clawed for their guns, but they drew their hands away from their holsters as they saw he had them covered.

"That's better," said Solitaire. "Now reach high, all of yuh."

A gun roared from outside the saloon. A bullet hit the lantern and knocked it from the bar, extinguishing the light. The Whistling Waddy dropped to the floor as guns blazed in the darkness. Lead fanned the air where he had been standing a moment ago.

"The posse!" shouted the man outside. "Get out of there, fast!"

Feet thudded across the floor, then horses clattered into motion. From outside came a shout and the barking of guns swiftly grew louder as the posse dashed up. The clamor faded as the lawmen chased after the retreating outlaws.

Solitaire began whistling that strange, sinister, little melody that was a song of death. He found the lantern and got to his feet. He discovered that a bullet had knocked the lantern over, but had not broken it. He struck a match and held it to the wick. Again light gleamed through the empty saloon.

He was still determined to try to find the woman he had heard sobbing. For half and hour he searched up and down the street, entering one building after another, but he could not find her. Finally he returned to the saloon in disgust.

"Reckon the thing for me to do is find the place where they hid the bank money and turn it over to the posse," he decided.

It did not take him long to discover the loose board in the floor. He began to pry it up, using the barrel of one of his guns as a lever. In the space beneath he saw a bundle wrapped in oilskin. He drew it out and opened it. It was filled with paper money, all big bills.

"Got one of them!" snapped a voice

from the door of the saloon. "Put yore hands up!"

Solitaire glanced calmly over his shoulder as six men came trooping in through the door. The man in the lead wore a sheriff's star pinned to his vest. He was middle-aged, square-faced and cold-eyed, and he had the Whistling Waddy covered with the gun in his right hand.

"GLAD to see yuh, Sheriff," said Solitaire. He straightened up slowly and turned to face the six men. "I found the money them bank robbers hid here."

"Uh-huh," grunted the sheriff. "Seems to me that I've seen yuh hangin' around town the last couple of days. Who are yuh, anyway?"

"Solitaire Stevens is the name, though some folks call me the Whistlin' Waddy."

"The Whistlin' Waddy!" his attitude instantly changing to one of respect. "Heard of yuh. I'm Sheriff Matt Lawson and this is my posse. We're after them coyotes who robbed the Cattlemen's Bank in Hilltown tonight. They jest got away from here a little while ago. Lost their trail, so we come back here. Yuh say yuh found the money they stole?"

"Mebbe he did, and mebbe he's one of the gang tryin' to run a sandy on us," warned a member of the posse. "Don't forget that Bill Denver, the cashier of the bank, lived long enough to give us a description of the hombre who was leader of them sidewinders, Sheriff. Bill said the leader was a tall jasper who was whistling while they held up the bank."

"Meanin' yuh think I'm the leader of them outlaws?" demanded Solitaire. "Yuh shore made a wrong guess about that. I was in town fightin' them hombres myself. Yuh can ask Higgins, the bartender in the Four Aces, if I wasn't."

"Then what are yuh doing here?" asked Lawson.

Solitaire hesitated. He realized he was in a tight spot. To tell Sheriff Lawson and his men that he had merely ridden out to look over the old ghost town because the bartender had made him curious would not sound particularly convincing.

"Why did yuh come here, Stevens?" repeated the sheriff, a note of impatience in his voice.

"I'll tell you why!" It was a slender, blond girl dressed in riding clothes who spoke from the doorway of the saloon. Even though her face was dirt-streaked and tear-stained, she was remarkably pretty. "He came here to meet my uncle and murder him!"

The sheriff and the posse men had turned, startled, as soon as the girl had spoken. That brief moment when they were off-guard was all the Whistling Waddy needed. His heavy Colts were in his hands, covering the six men as they again faced him. Unconsciously Solitaire began to whistle a plaintive little melody that was as much a warning as was the rattle of a diamond-back snake.

"Put yore gun back in the holster, Sheriff," said Stevens when he finished the song.

Lawson dropped his gun into his holster and turned to the girl.

"Joyce Wade," he said. "What are yuh doin' here, gal?"

"It seems like I've been here for hours," replied Joyce. She glared at Solitaire. "And that man shot Uncle Adam."

"Jest a minute, gal," said the sheriff quietly. "Let's get the straight of this. Yuh say that Adam Wade is dead?"

Joyce looked about her wildly, peering into the shadows beyond the light from the lantern.

"His body was in here. I saw it. I tell you I did!"

"The gal's right," agreed Solitaire. "Wade's body is behind the bar. That's where I found it."

"Where you left it after you shot him, you mean!" snapped Joyce..

"Lady, if yuh keep on talkin' like that, I ain't gonna like you," said Solitaire with a sad shake of his head. "Yuh mind tellin' us why yuh're so shore I downed yore uncle?"

"Of course, I'll tell you all I know. For the past month Uncle Adam had been worrying about something, but he wouldn't tell me what it was when I asked him. It had something to do with the law. I'm sure of that, because Uncle Adam was always talking to Tod Duffy, that deputy marshal who has been hanging around the ranch for the past few weeks."

"Duffy, eh?" Sheriff Lawson snorted. "Never did see a lawman who worked at it less than that hombre. But go on, Joyce. Then what?"

"Today Uncle Adam seemed even more worried than usual. I heard him talking to Duffy, but I heard only a few words. Uncle said, 'I'll get it out of the bank today.' And Duffy said, 'That's the best way to do.' "

"Then yore uncle went to town and drew five thousand dollars out of the bank," supplied the Whistling Waddy. "Was that it?"

"How do yuh know that?" demanded the sheriff.

Solitaire slid his left-hand gun back into the holster. He handed Lawson the bankbook he had taken from the body.

"Found this on Wade," he explained. "Yuh can see that he drew out the money today. It ain't on him now and I shore ain't got it."

"I guess uncle did draw out the money," admitted Joyce. "He didn't tell me, but while he was in town he got a letter in the mail for the ranch. It seemed to make him much more careful, but at the same time—well, dangerous, I guess. I followed when he rode out to this ghost town tonight. He met a tall man here and they went into this saloon together.

"I sneaked up and looked in. They were standing at the bar, drinking. The tall man had his back toward me, but he wore a black hat, gray flannel shirt and two guns. Suddenly he drew his gun and shot Uncle Adam."

"What did yuh do then?"

Solitaire knew the eyes of all the other men were looking him over from head to foot, making mental notes of the black Stetson that he wore, of his gray flannel shirt and the two guns he again held in his hands, covering the posse.

"I screamed and ran," answered Joyce. "I was afraid that you might kill me, too, if you caught me. I hid in a rain barrel—"

"A rain barrel!" blurted the Whistling Waddy. "No wonder I couldn't find yuh when I looked."

HOOFBEATS sounded out in the street. Apparently a single rider was arriving in Pay-strike. That he rode boldly along the street, even though he could see the mounts of the posse, indicated that he was not an outlaw.

"Mebbe if yuh put them guns away, we could talk things over peaceful-like, Stevens," said the sheriff, jerking his head at the Colts in the Whistling Waddy's hands. "Figger yuh're shadin' me on the draw, anyway."

Solitaire nodded and dropped his guns back into leather just as a big man came bursting in through the saloon entrance. He wore a gray Stetson, a black-and-white checkered shirt, and there was one gun in the holster on his lean hip. The Whistling Waddy sighed. He had hoped that this new arrival might be the man dressed like himself who had killed the girl's uncle.

"Tod Duffy!" cried the sheriff. "Where did yuh come from?"

Duffy paid no attention to the sheriff.

"Yuh're all right, Joyce? I was worried about yuh when I found that yuh wasn't at the ranch and hadn't been seen for hours. I come here at once."

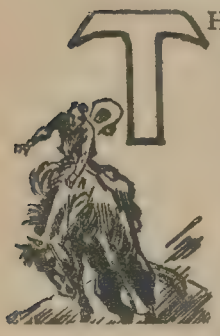
"Shore was lucky yuh knew exactly where to go," said Solitaire softly, looking at Duffy and then at the girl.

"Yuh tell anybody yuh aimed to head for this old ghost town, Miss Wade?"

"Why, no, I didn't," she replied, her eyes widening. "Not anyone."

CHAPTER III

No Jailing for Solitaire



THE big, good-looking deputy marshal glared at Solitaire.

"What are yuh drivin' at?" he snarled. "Are yuh tryin' to prove that I downed Adam Wade?"

"Don't need to prove it," said Solitaire. "Yuh're doing a pretty good job of that yoreownself."

"Meanin' what?" demanded Duffy.

"That this man killed Uncle Adam," said Joyce quickly, pointing at the Whistling Waddy. "And he's trying to put the blame on you, Tod."

"Why you rat!" Duffy's hand flashed to his gun. "I'll kill yuh for this!"

Solitaire made no attempt to draw his own weapons. Instead he flung himself at the big man, caught Duffy around the knees and they went down with a crash. They rolled around on the floor, fighting savagely.

"Stop them!" cried Joyce. "Stevens is guilty and you're not even trying to arrest him, Sheriff!" Impulsively she grabbed up the whiskey bottle standing on the bar. "I'll stop them if you won't!"

The Whistling Waddy had Duffy down and was leaning over him, pinning his arms. Joyce brought the whiskey bottle crashing down on Solitaire's head. Though his black Stetson protected him from the full force of the blow, it stunned him. He rolled over and lay motionless.

From the door of the saloon a gun roared. Another thundered outside an open window. One of the posse men staggered back, then pitched forward on his face. There was a blue hole through his temple.

"The bank robbers!" shouted the sheriff. "They've come back after the money!" He knocked the lantern off the bar with a sweep of his arm. It dropped behind the counter, out of sight. "Let 'em have it, boys!"

The lawmen's guns started blazing as they fired at the outlaws stationed at the door and windows. Now that there was no longer any light in the saloon, it was the sheriff's men who had the advantage. They were in the dark, while the men outside were outlined against the starlight as they sprang to the door and windows to fire.

Solitaire edged along the floor, searching for the bank money that had been left lying there ever since he had dropped it. He held his gun in his right hand while he searched with his left. A hand grabbed for the money just as Stevens found the packages of bills. He rapped someone's fingers hard with his gun barrel and heard a curse.

He leaped to his feet with the bundle of money in one hand. He edged behind the bar, felt around for an empty water barrel he had seen there and dropped the money into it. Guns were roaring and thundering in the darkness. His own heavy Colts joined in the fray.

"Got them!" boomed the sheriff's voice out of the darkness, finally. "There was only five of them sidewinders in the bunch that robbed the bank and we've downed four of 'em."

The Whistling Waddy edged toward the door. He still had to prove that he wasn't the leader of the bank robbers and that he had not killed Adam Wade. He realized that he would have to get away for a time in order to prove his own innocence. To start with, he had to have a talk with a certain bartender named Higgins.

He slid out through the door, unfastened one of the horses of the posse from the hitching rail. Giv-

ing the animal a slap on the flank with his hat, he sent it tearing down the street with hoofs thudding loudly. At the same time Solitaire whistled loudly, then let the sound gradually grow softer as he ducked into the shadows between two buildings.

"The Whistling Waddy!" shouted the sheriff from inside the saloon. "Strike a light somebody! Sounds like he got away."

Matches flickered in the saloon. There were angry murmurs as Lawson and his men realized that Solitaire Stevens had made his escape.

"AFTER him!" roared Duffy. "He's stolen the money!"

One of the bank robbers who had dropped to the street, riddled with bullets, rolled over and by some last superhuman effort began to crawl through the dust. Solitaire watched him from the shadows. He saw Duffy come out of the saloon and walk close to the crawling man.

"Tod," croaked the man in the dust as the deputy marshal headed for his horse. "Help me! Yuh—"

Duffy's gun roared and the pitiful, crawling figure sprawled flat. Hate flamed in the eyes of the Whistling Waddy as he glared at the big deputy marshal. He knew that Duffy had killed the wounded man deliberately. It was all Solitaire could do to keep from blasting him down with his own guns, but he realized that by doing so now he would only be injuring his own cause. Only by permitting Duffy to remain alive could he prove that he was not the leader of the outlaws.

There was no doubt in Solitaire's mind that it was Tod Duffy who had killed Adam Wade. If not, then how had the deputy marshal ever known that the owner of the Flying W had been killed? But Duffy had been clever. In killing Wade, he had worn another hat and a different shirt, an outfit that was identical with the one the Whistling Waddy was wearing now.

The sheriff and his men had rushed out of the saloon with the girl close behind them. They swung into their saddles, the girl getting her horse from the place where she had left it just outside of the town. Solitaire hadn't searched that far when he had been looking for her.

"What were yuh shootin' at, Duffy?" asked the sheriff.

"One of them coyotes tried to get me," answered the deputy marshal, nodding to the dead man in the street. "I killed him."

They rode away, six men and a girl, trailing a riderless horse that they thought had been stolen by the Whistling Waddy. Solitaire smiled grimly as he watched them go. The sheriff and his four-man posse had been six when they had arrived at the saloon, but one of them had died there. If they had known that Duffy, the sixth man who now rode with them, was the killer they wanted, it might have saved them from wearing out a lot of saddle leather.

"Reckon I'll go have me a little talk with Higgins," said Solitaire. The pounding hoofs had faded into the distance. The ghost town again grew silent and deserted, save for the dead man and the Whistling Waddy. "Last thing the sheriff will figger on me doin' is riding into Hilltown. It ain't exactly the move a wanted man would be expected to make."

He found his roan still ground-hitched beneath the big tree outside the town. As he swung into saddle, he realized that there might be people in Hilltown who knew that he answered to the description of the leader of the bank robbers.

"It's takin' chances that makes things interestin'," he said.

The thought of definite action lightened his spirits and he began whistling musically. The strains of "Oh, Susanna" trilled from his lips as he rode back toward the little cowtown three miles away.

It was still early, not more than

nine P. M., when the Whistling Waddy swung out of saddle at the hitching rail in front of the Four Aces Saloon. He fastened the roan at the end of the line of horses standing at the rack, then strolled in through the swinging doors.

There were a number of men in the saloon. Some of them were playing cards at the tables. Others were drinking at the bar. But they all seemed listless and ill at ease. Solitaire suspected that most of them had had money in the bank and were short of ready cash since the robbery.

Jed Higgins, the stout barkeeper, blinked puzzledly, stood with his mouth open as the Whistling Waddy strolled up to the bar. Solitaire looked at the fat man, who reminded him of an overstuffed sea-lion, and shook his head sadly.

"I seen a trout do that once," he said. "And yuh know what happened?"

"What?" asked Higgins nervously.

It was obvious that the return of the Whistling Waddy was making him remarkably unhappy.

"That trout swallowed the hook and twenty feet of fishin'-line," stated Stevens. "I'll have two fingers of rye."

The barkeeper placed a bottle and a glass in front of Stevens. Solitaire poured himself a drink and downed it quickly.

"Yuh go to the old ghost town?" Higgins asked, trying to make his tone casual.

"Shore, I went there," said Solitaire. "And I wore my black hat and gray flannel shirt. Pay-strike was a plumb busy place."

"Busy?" Higgins looked puzzled. "Yuh mean there was somebody else there?"

"Yeah," said Solitaire. "Some of them was friends of yores, I reckon."

Higgins did not appear to notice what Stevens had said. The barkeeper was staring over the Whistling Waddy's shoulder at someone who had just entered the saloon. Higgins looked as though he had seen a walking nightmare.

Solitaire poured himself another drink and then turned around easily, the glass in his hand. Tod Duffy was coming toward the bar. A single glance told Solitaire that the big man was eager for trouble. His hand flashed to his gun as he drew closer to the Whistling Waddy.

Before he could draw, Solitaire flung the liquor in his glass into Duffy's face with his left hand, while his right suddenly appeared with his gun. "What's the idea, Duffy?" he demanded tersely.

"As deputy marshal I'm arrestin' yuh for the murder of Adam Wade!" shouted Duffy, angrily wiping the liquor off his face.

His voice carried through the saloon. Men cursed and leaped to their feet.

"Stay where yuh are, all of yuh!" snapped Solitaire, covering the men who crowded around him. "I'm not standin' for no foolin'."

"He's the leader of them jaspers that robbed the bank, too!" yelled Higgins. "They hid the money somewhere in the old ghost town."

"How do yuh know that?" Duffy glared at the barkeeper.

"Why—why, I jest know it," stammered Higgins.

"If there ever was a feller who talked hisself to death, yuh're shore it," advised the Whistling Waddy. "I'm bettin' yuh're plumb askin' for a lead ticket to Boot Hill."

"So the barkeeper has been workin' with yuh," said Duffy quickly. "I suspected that, so I left the posse still lookin' for yuh, and headed back to Hilltown. If Higgins isn't workin' with yuh, then how does he know the bank money is hidden in Pay-strike?"

SOLITAIRE believed that Duffy had a better reason than that for leaving the posse. He had probably returned to the cowtown, intending to

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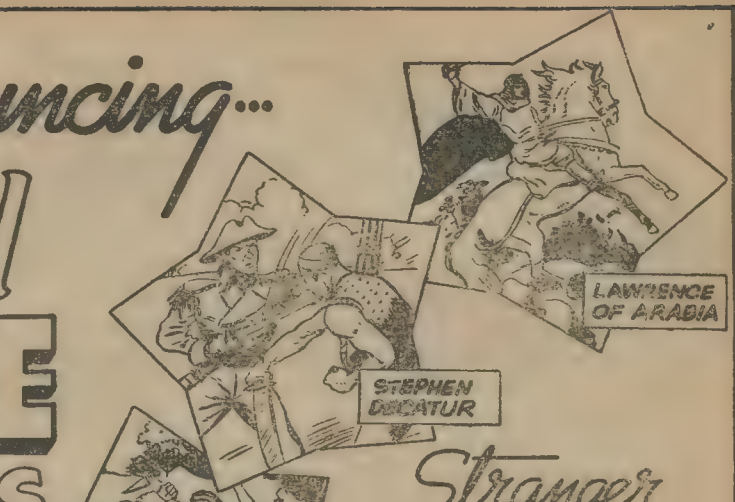

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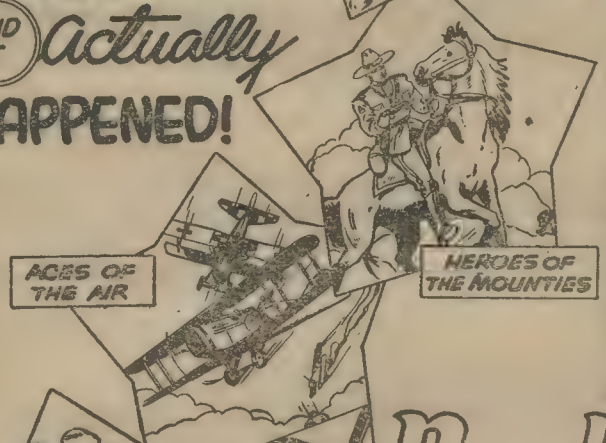

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tell Higgins what had happened in Pay-strike. When Duffy had seen the Whistling Waddy in the saloon, the big deputy marshal must have felt that this was his chance to get Stevens alone and find out where the bank money was hidden. Solitaire had no desire to let Duffy arrest him, for he felt sure the man was a fake.

"And while we're askin' questions," said the Whistling Waddy, "how come yuh know about Adam Wade bein' stabbed to death, Duffy?"

"I was with the posse," snapped Tod Duffy. "Wade wasn't stabbed. He was shot in the head."

"Yuh couldn't know that unless yuh looked behind the bar at the saloon in Pay-strike, and yuh didn't do that," said Solitaire. He glanced at a distinguished-looking gray-haired man who had been playing cards at one of the tables, but who was now standing and listening. "Court is now in session, gentlemen. I'm askin' yuh to be the judge, Mister—"

"Judge Martin," supplied the gray-haired man with a smile. "I'll be glad to preside, if yuh wish. Yuh aim to speak in yore own defense?"

"I do."

"What sort of foolishness is this?" demanded Duffy angrily. "I'm arrestin' this man on a charge of bank robbery and murder."

"All right, Marshal," said the judge, "consider the prisoner as havin' been arrested as charged. He will now be permitted to speak to us in his own behalf."

"Thank yuh, Judge." The Whistling Waddy smiled. "Yore Honor, may I ask yuh a few questions first?"

"Certainly, if yuh wish." The judge seated himself at a table near the bar. "Proceed, but first left me have yore name."

"Solitaire Stevens. Most folks call me the Whistlin' Waddy."

"All right, Mister Stevens, what are yore questions?"

"First, how long have yuh known Tod Duffy?"

"A little over a month," answered the judge. "Previous to that he was a stranger in this particular part of the country."

"Yuh're thoroughly convinced that he's actually a deputy marshal?"

"Of course I am!" interrupted Duffy. "I ain't on trial, anyhow. You are."

"Please be quiet, Marshal," ordered Judge Martin. "You have arrested Solitaire Stevens on serious charges. He has the right to act in his own defense. In regard to the prisoner's last question, Tod Duffy had shown me credentials that have convinced me he is actually a deputy marshal."

"Reckon that settles that." There was a note of disappointment in the Whistling Waddy's voice. "Any of yuh know why Adam Wade drew five thousand dollars out of the bank today?"

"No, not exactly." The judge frowned. "I happen to be the president of the bank, but Wade refused to tell me why he was withdrawin' the money. Said it was a personal matter."

"He wasn't figgerin' on buyin' any new stock, or anything like that?" asked Stevens.

"Not that I know of, anyway. And now suppose yuh tell us yore story, Stevens."

QUICKLY Solitaire related everything that had happened from the time he had reached the ghost town and heard the shot that had killed Wade. The judge and the other men in the saloon listened in silence until the Whistling Waddy finished.

"You tell a right convincin' story, Stevens," admitted Martin with a worried frown. "But all the same, by yore own admission three people have accused yuh of these here crimes—Miss Wade, the sheriff and the deputy marshal. Reckon we better hold yuh in jail till the sheriff and the posse get back to town."

As Solitaire began to whistle softly, the men tensed, for there was something sinister in the sound. His guns were still in his hands, covered everyone in the saloon. Judge Martin got to his feet and stepped toward the Whistling Waddy, his hand outstretched.

"Give me yore guns, Stevens."

Solitaire thrust one Colt into the holster.

Before the elderly man could begin to protest, the Whistling Waddy caught him by the hand and spun him around in front as a shield.

"I'm not goin' to jail," snapped Solitaire. "I'm leavin' here now. If any of yuh try to stop me, it's gonna be too bad for the judge."

KEEPING Martin in front of him, he edged to the door. Making sure there was no one out in the street, he released the judge and dashed for his horse. He expected Martin to draw and fire at him, but the old man just stood there, watching.

"The Flyin' W outfit found a dead hombre out on the range a month ago!" he called out instead. "Mebbe that might interest yuh!"

Solitaire waved his hand. The roan went galloping down the street. Men poured out of the saloon and guns started blazing. Several riders burst out from among the houses and took up the pursuit. Solitaire zigzagged without firing back. Abruptly a man with a six-gun appeared in front of him, taking careful aim. The Whistling Waddy snatched the seldom-used rifle out of its saddle-boot, clipped the man on the side of the head with just enough force to do no more than stun him.

Leaving the pack far behind, Stevens headed for the Flying W, and he intended to get there in a hurry. What the judge had said interested him greatly. That dead man the Flying W crew had found might explain everything.

CHAPTER IV

Greed Makes Corpses

AN HOUR later the Whistling Waddy topped a rise and saw the buildings of the Flying W spread nestling at the foot of the hill. Lights were burning in the windows of the ranchhouse. Someone was still awake on the spread.

He rode down the hill, ground-hitched his horse in the shadow of a big oak tree and approached the ranchhouse on foot. He found the front door standing half-open, peered in through the nearest window.

Joyce Wade was seated beside the body of her uncle. Evidently some of the Flying W crew had been sent after their dead boss and had brought him home. The corpse had been placed on a sofa and covered with a blanket. There was no one but the girl and the dead man in the room.

The Whistling Waddy stepped in through the open door. The girl gave a startled gasp as she saw him, but she did not scream.

"I've been hoping that I would see you again," she said, recovering from her momentary fright. "Out there in the ghost town I accused you of a terrible thing, but now I know that I was wrong. Oh, I was so very wrong!"

"What do yuh mean?"

Solitaire looked at her, puzzled.

"When I got back here tonight," she said in a broken voice, "I found a letter that Uncle Adam had left for me."

She picked it up off a table beside her and handed it to him.

Dear Joyce:

Ever since he came here he's been pleading with me, demanding more and more money. He has some of the old gang with him, men who knew me when I rode the owlhoot trails. He promised that they would all get out of this part of the coun-

try if I paid them five thousand dollars—a thousand for each one of them. I'm to meet Tod Duffy in the old ghost town tonight and give him the money. If I don't come back, give this letter to the sheriff.

Your Uncle.

"I've been shore it was Duffy all the time," said Solitaire. "He musta seen me around town and knew I was the Whistling Waddy, so he got hisself a black hat and a gray shirt that looks like these I'm wearin'. He figgered on blamin' me for the bank robbery and the killin' of yore uncle."

"Of course," confessed Joyce unhappily. "And when I got to the ghost town tonight, I never saw the face of the man who was drinking with Uncle Adam and then shot him. It was a man about your size, wearing the same kind of clothes, so I was sure you were the killer." She looked at him appealingly. "I'm sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forget it," said Solitaire with a grin. "I heard that some of yore outfit found a dead man out on the range about the same time that Duffy showed up here. I'm bettin' that was the real deputy marshal and that Duffy killed him and stole his papers. He's the leader of the outlaws, all right."

"This is all very interestin'," snarled a harsh voice from the doorway. Tod Duffy stood there, a gun in either hand as he faced Solitaire and the girl. "But neither of yuh is gonna live to tell about it."

"You forget one thing, Duffy," said the Whistling Waddy. "If yuh kill me, yuh'll never learn where I hid the bank money."

"So it was you that grabbed it in the dark!" exclaimed Duffy. "Well, mebbe I'll find a way to make yuh talk." He dropped one gun back into the holster, but he still covered Solitaire with the other Colt as he walked over to the lamp that was burning on the table. "I know that yuh'd shore hate to see anything happen to Joyce."

The girl had remained motionless in her chair, but she was watching Duffy like a captive bird gazing at a snake. He removed the glass chimney, then picked up the burning lamp by its base.

"Shore is gonna be a shame to set all that pretty blond hair on fire," said Duffy as he held the burning wick close to the girl's head. "But I'll jest have to do it if Stevens don't tell me where the money is hidden."

"Wait!" rapped the Whistling Waddy. "I'll tell yuh. Leave the gal alone!"

"Now, yuh're talkin'," said Duffy.

ABRUPTLY Joyce leaped to her feet, giving the chair a shove that knocked it over backward. It struck Duffy, jarring the lamp in his hand so that the kerosene spattered all over him. The flaming wick caught on the vapor rising from his clothes and they began to burn. With a howl of terror, Duffy dropped his gun and began beating out the flames with his hands.

He succeeded in a few moments, but by that time the Whistling Waddy had him covered. Joyce kicked Duffy's Colt across the floor so that it was out of reach.

"Trying to burn my hair, and I just washed it yesterday!" she cried.

"Looks like we've got yuh, Duffy," said Solitaire. "It's all over but the hanging."

A fat face suddenly loomed at an open window. A gun roared. Stevens cursed as a bullet raked his arm and knocked his gun out of his hand.

"Get out of here pronto, Duffy!" shouted Higgins. "The sheriff and the posse are headin' this way and ridin' fast!"

Duffy leaped to the door. His other gun was still in the holster, but he made no attempt to use it on the Whistling Waddy and the girl. Evidently he had decided to let them remain alive until he learned where the bank money was located.

"I'll see yuh later!" he threatened. "And yuh'll talk next time."

Duffy vanished through the doorway and Higgins disappeared from the window. Solitaire reached down and picked his gun up off the floor.

"The fools!" he said in a loud, clear voice. "The bank money is hidden in the water barrel behind the bar!"

A few moments later he heard the pounding of horses' hoofs outside. He smiled at the girl, even though he knew that Duffy and the barkeeper were getting away.

"I got to be ridin', Miss," he said. "Jest want to be shore that things work out the way I figger they will."

"What do you mean?" Joyce looked at him with a bewildered frown on her lovely face. "I don't understand."

Mounted men thundered up to the ranchhouse. The sheriff and the posse had arrived. Lawson came dashing in. After a quick explanation from Joyce, the lawman rushed out again. This time the Whistling Waddy was with him.

"Come on!" called Solitaire as he got his roan and swung into saddle. "Head for the ghost town!"

With the Whistling Waddy in the lead, the posse rode toward Paystrike, their horses going at a swift gallop. Solitaire had convinced the sheriff and his men that they would find Duffy and Higgins in the ghost town, looking for the bank money. Not much convincing was needed, for the letter Wade had left proved that Duffy was the man they wanted.

"LOOK!" exclaimed Stevens as they rode through the canyon and the shadowy buildings of the ghost town loomed ahead. "There are two hosses tied to the hitching rail in front of the old saloon."

"Come on, men!" shouted Sheriff Lawson excitedly. "We've got them!"

With their guns drawn, the posse thundered along the street of the old mining town. At any moment they expected the two men in the saloon to start firing, but complete silence greeted the arrival of the sheriff's men.

The Whistling Waddy ground-hitched the roan by dropping the separate reins and slid out of saddle. He reached the door of the saloon before anyone else, his gun was ready in his hand.

The oil lamp was still burning. A quick glance at the two motionless figures sprawled out on the floor told Solitaire that he would not need the heavy Colt. He grinned and put it back in its holster.

"Duffy and Higgins!" exclaimed the sheriff as he peered over the

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COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Whistling Waddy's shoulder. "Looks like they downed each other."

"Figgered somethin' like this might happen," said Solitaire. "That's why I made shore they'd hear me say where I'd hidden the bank money before they left the ranch. I knew that would send 'em both back here to get it."

The men of the posse were examining the two bodies. They revealed that Duffy had been shot in the back. The bank money had fallen all over the floor as the man who had pretended to be a deputy marshal had dropped. Higgins had been shot in the chest, they discovered.

"Looks like Duffy downed Higgins, but the bartender wasn't dead," said the sheriff. "Higgins got Duffy jest as he was gettin' away with the money."

"That's it, all right," agreed Solitaire. "Higgins talked too much in town, made a lot of slips that gave Duffy away. Reckon Duffy figgered he better get rid of him pronto. Funny thing, if Tod Duffy hadn't been so greedy, he'd still be alive. He had the five thousand that he got from Adam Wade, but he still wanted the bank money, too."

"Well, yuh've shore proved to us that yuh ain't the guilty man," said the sheriff, extending his hand to Stevens. "Sorry, pard. We kind of misjudged yuh."

"That's all right. Forget it." Solitaire grinned as he shook hands with the lawman. "The next time I go lookin' over an old ghost town, I hope I don't find nothin' but spooks there. They're a heap more peaceful and soothin' than bullets."

HE STROLLED to the door and stepped out into the darkness. A few moments later the sound of someone whistling musically came to the ears of the men in the old saloon. There was nothing sinister to the tune this time. It was "My Old Kentucky Home" and the accompaniment was the pounding of a horse's hoofs.

The sounds gradually died away into the distance.

"The Whistlin' Waddy," said Sheriff Lawson with an admiring smile. "Boy, that jasper is a real man to ride the river with!"

They nodded soberly. They had discovered that for themselves, just as had other men all over the vast cow country.

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NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS

Pegleg Peters

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Rope Shadow," "Lawmen Are Tough," etc.

THE desert, so Pegleg Peters had heard, is like a pretty woman. She'll lure you on and on with her flaming beauty and golden promises—then she'll kill you. And now he knew it was true. Looking across the campfire into the black eyes of Luke Shark, he saw—death.

"You mean," Pegleg whispered, "you're takin' *all* the gold?"

Shark grinned, his thin lips peeling back from doglike teeth. "Why should I give you half of it?"

"But when we hit into the desert, five months ago, we agreed to share fifty-fifty whatever we found."

"That was five months ago," Shark grunted. "Now we've got gold—and I've got the guns. Ever since we uncovered that vein of gold, I knew I was gonna kill you and take the whole she-bang. But I needed you to dig and grabble for me then. Now the colors've petered out, and I don't need you."

Luke Shark took up the tortuous trek toward Wolf Springs

Pegleg Peters' seamed face was gray and still. He was a runty little gent with pale eyes and drooping longhorn mustaches. He had only one good leg. The other, from the knee down, was wooden, with a square brass tip at the bottom.

"Look, Shark," Pegleg said earnestly. "I don't mind dyin' so much, but that mineral you're takin' ain't rightly mine. It belongs to my gran'son, a blue-eyed, curly-haired little button just four years old, named Billy. Billy ain't like other kids. He can't move his legs. He won't ever romp and play and ride like other buttons, not till he goes back East and has an operation. And that'll cost a lot of money—five thousand dollars, mebbe. My son, the kid's daddy, has a ridin' job, but he never could save up that much."

Shark jiggled the gun. "Now, ain't that too bad? I got no time for fairy tales, old man."

"Wait!" Pegleg begged. "Don't you sabe, Shark? That's why, when you showed up in Yaqui Gap and offered to grub-stake somebody who knew the desert, I took you up. I aim to buy new legs for Billy with my share of this gold."

"Ain't my fault the brat can't walk," Shark sneered. "I'm still takin' the gold!"

Pegleg quieted. When Shark had awakened him a few moments ago

An Old Prospector Makes the Desert His Ally!

with a gun-muzzle in his stomach, Pegleg Peters had known he was in a jam. Shark had Pegleg's old Peacemaker six-gun.

"What you aimin' to do?" he now asked.

"Bullets leave holes," Shark said. "But when a man dies of thirst what kind of sign does he leave?"

Pegleg stared, aghast. "Y-you can't do that!"

"Can't I? Go get that jack and bring 'im here."

Meekly, Pegleg clumped into the brush nearby and brought a shaggy burro into camp. At Shark's order, he went about strapping a pack on the animal.

"This pack-ass can't carry everything," Pegleg announced. "Have to leave off some of the gold, or some of the water."

"One can of water'll last me till I reach Wolf Springs," Shark said. On the ground nearby were three water casks. Quickly, Shark fired two shots, and streams of water spurted from jagged holes which appeared in two of the cans.

Bitter-eyed, Pegleg watched as the precious water was gulped by the sand. Shark filled a smaller canteen from the remaining cask. Then, under the menace of Shark's gun, Pegleg lashed the almost full cask to the already heavily loaded burro. He'd already placed the two rawhide bags of gold in the pack.

"Well, I'm on my way," Shark grinned. "It's seventy miles to Wolf Springs. Think you can make it without a drink?"

Pegleg said harshly, "Go on, shoot me, you blasted buzzard! That'd be easier than dyin' of thirst!"

"Easier for you, mebbe," Shark sneered. "Well, so long—chump!"

Luke Shark prodded the burro away across the desert without looking back. Pegleg watched the specks grow smaller in the desert haze, bitterly contemplating the queer trick fate had played. Hardly a drop of water remained in the punctured water casks. There was a little food, but food was almost useless without water.

And the gold he had spent slavish months digging from the blazing desert, gold that was to have bought new legs for a plucky, curly-haired button, was gone. . . .

LUKE SHARK had gone only a few miles when he discovered Pegleg Peters following slowly along his backtrail.

"Crazy ol' coot," the gold-thief grinned.

He unslung the canteen and drank deeply. By mid-morning the sun beat down fiercely from a brass-hued sky. Red heat-devils danced, and the wind whined in hot gusts across the desert. Savagely Shark cursed the heat and wind. Then he chuckled at his own cleverness, thinking about the things he would do with the gold when he reached civilization.

By mid-day, Pegleg Peters had cut the distance between them to less than half a mile. Then Shark saw that, slung over Pegleg's shoulder as he hobbled along on his wooden leg, was a water cask!

Shark cursed. Had he left some water in one of the casks? He stopped. But Pegleg stopped, too, warily.

Muttering angrily, Shark started back toward Pegleg. Pegleg promptly hobbled the other way. Shark yelled, lifted the canteen and shook it enticingly. But if Pegleg saw, he gave no sign.

"Crazy as hell," Shark muttered, returning to the burro.

He took up the tortuous trek toward Wolf Springs, many miles away. All the rest of that day he urged the burro across the desolate sink. It was a swell joke, he thought, that old coot hobbling along back there with an empty water keg on his shoulder.

But an imp of doubt tortured Shark. Was the can empty? For, a dozen times that day, he saw Pegleg pause

and lift the can to his lips as if swigging deeply!

"Heat's got 'im," Shark told himself. "He won't last long now."

Several times he stopped, yelled at Pegleg, offering him a drink. But Pegleg doggedly refused to approach, remaining always just out of gun-range.

The sun was still two hours above the horizon when Shark emptied the small canteen he carried. And then he made a discovery that shook him with cold fear. The water cask, strapped to the burro, was empty!

In the bottom of the cask was a tiny round hole through which the water had leaked. Pegleg Peters, Shark realized, had cunningly punctured the cask while lashing it to the burro.

Furious with anger and terror, Shark started prodding the burro frantically across the desert. By sundown thirst had gripped his thick throat. Tawny shadows slung across the desert. Seized with unreasoning fear, Shark urged the stubborn beast on through the night. One thing, in the dark he couldn't see that grim old figure trudging along behind him like an avenging shadow, nor the buzzards that had been overhead since mid-day.

But Pegleg Peters was back there, Shark knew. Maybe he'd even crept closer in the shadows.

Finally, realizing he was near exhaustion, Shark made camp. But he was afraid to sleep, afraid Pegleg would creep up on him in the dark and crush his skull with a rock. Through the night he sat with his back against a boulder, gun in hand, watching the desert. Once he thought he saw a ghostly figure skulking along the brow of a ridge, but when he investigated the matter he found nothing.

At dawn, standing atop a rise three hundred yards away, was the runty figure of Pegleg Peters. Slowly, as Shark watched, Pegleg lifted the water cask to his lips.

Gibbering eagerly, Shark started toward the oldster. But Pegleg vanished abruptly over the hill. Cursing thickly, Luke Shark feverishly loaded the burro and started on across the desert.

The sun came up sullen and red. The wind died, and the heat became scalding. Vultures returned to the sky. Shark knew he could never reach Wolf Springs without water. Already his tongue had begun to swell. Fresh rage twisted his thin, dark face, and he shook his fists savagely at the low-circling buzzards.

ON AND ON. The hours till mid-day seemed endless. The sun was like a huge blow-torch, searing him with its fierce heat. The wind came again, seeming to hammer with sledge-hammer blows at him, grinding sand into his skin and eyes. Its low moan across the desert seemed to Shark like the mirthless laughter of the little red desert gods.

And there behind him, whenever he looked, was the scrawny figure of Pegleg Peters. Sometimes Pegleg would be trudging along with lowered head; sometimes he would tilt the water cask. . . .

Something seemed to snap suddenly in Shark's brain. Mouthing incoherently, he turned and reeled back toward Pegleg Peters. Pegleg turned and walked slowly the other way.

"Wait!" Shark yelled hoarsely, frantically. "Can't you see I'm perishin' for a drink? Gimme a swallow from that can—just one swallow!"

Pegleg stopped, still just out of gun-range.

"What makes you think I've got water?" he called.

"Ain't I seen you drinkin' from that keg for the last two days?" Shark croaked harshly. "Just a swallow, Peters!"

"You ready to do what I say?"

"Anything," pledged the panic-stricken Shark. "You can have the gold, only gimme a drink!"

"Toss the guns on the ground, and

walk back apiece, first," Pegleg ordered.

Shark obeyed, and Pegleg came warily forward to retrieve the two weapons from the sand. He hefted them, and said, "I give the orders from here out, Shark."

Shark snarled huskily. "Damn orders, and the guns, too! Just gimme that water keg!"

"All right, but it's empty," Pegleg said calmly. "It's been empty ever since you shot a hole in it two days ago."

"Don't lie to me," Shark gibbered. "I saw you drinkin' from it. Besides, you wouldn't lug an empty keg about over the desert."

"Wouldn't I?" Pegleg grinned. "That was an old desert trick to make you come crawlin' on your belly, beggin' for a drink. You can't fight the desert with guns, Shark. You've got to have savvy. I've got some water, all right. Not much, but enough to get us to Wolf Springs where I can turn you over to the law."

"But you said that the keg was empty."

Pegleg Peters chuckled. He sat down on the sand and calmly unstrapped his wooden leg. Then Shark's astonished eyes saw that the post was hollow—a hollow sufficiently large to hold more than a quart of water. And it was still about half full.

"I had you figured from the start," Pegleg stated, with a grin. "I figured you'd try to kill me and take all the gold before we got back to Yaqui Gap. So I sorta took precautions. Now we'll have a wee drink."

He had the guns, and over there on the burro was the gold. Shark groaned dismally. He knew when he was out-maneuvered.

"And in just a little while Billy will have new legs—so he can romp and play and ride like other kids!" Pegleg said softly. "Better legs than this old stump of mine."

But, under the circumstances, this was problematical.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 75

1—During the turbulent days of the old West, the duty of running down several gangs of robbers and desperadoes who operated in the territory of Oklahoma, fell to three gun-fighting law-officers, Bill Tilghman, Chris Madsen, and Heck Thomas. So outstanding was their work that these three, led by Tilghman, became known as "the Guardsmen of the Southwest," and they were given credit for driving the outlaws out of Oklahoma. It is said of Tilghman that he never in his life shot a man unless it was absolutely necessary. One of the most daring acts of his career was the capture of Bill Doolin, without firing a shot, after the bandit had said that he would never be taken alive.

2—From the San Francisco peaks, Flagstaff, Arizona, seven different states may be seen.

3—In the sketch Joe Woods, noted gunfighter of the old West, is wearing his pistol "rustler-style"—hanging loosely on the right side so as to be used for quick draw.

4—Madam Candelaria, who gave her house over at the disposal of Houston, Austin, Travis and other courageous men who had committed themselves to the cause of Texas freedom. Through the entire campaign she aided in nursing many of these fighters struggling for freedom.

5—Bob Ford survived Jesse James about ten years. He settled in the mining town of Creede, Colorado. Here Ford opened a bar and gambling den. Following some trouble he was shot by ex-deputy Ed Kelly and died on June 9, 1892.

6—Chief Black Kettle, during the turbulent days of the old West, was called the most bloodthirsty of all Cheyenne Indians.

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Gunman Wanted

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Lawman Lead," "Hangin' Day," etc.

The two men were pumping lead at each other

The Stranger from Concho Locks Horns With the Toughest Passel of Killers in a Lawless Range!

THE newcomer dropped into the saloon at dusk, and went straight down to the end of the bar. He stood there drinking alone, not seeming to see the sidelong glances cast in his direction from the table around which sat Burden and his Bar-B men.

A hush had fallen around the table, and Burden's grizzled foreman, Wade, sat drumming on the arm of his chair with his nervous fingers. Burden himself, a beefy individual with a red face and heavy dewlaps on his jaws, drained his glass and his wandering eyes again took in the lean man drinking alone.

But the man didn't pay any attention to him.

Burden began to show impatience, despite his efforts to conceal it. Finally he got up and went to the men's room. Then, coming back, he stopped at the end of the bar and or-

dered a whiskey. The man drinking alone still did not seem to see him.

Burden shoved the bottle over.

"Have a drink, stranger?"

The newcomer's lean face turned, and slightly amused gray eyes surveyed Burden slowly before the man answered.

"Thanks," he said, and poured a drink without having anything more to say—that is, to Burden. To himself, however, the stranger was saying plenty.

"This hombre sure is takin' an interest in me for some reason," he reflected calmly. "Wonder if he thinks he knows me—or maybe he's the law. Well, I'll be findin' out soon enough."

He drained his drink without again looking at Burden.

Burden tried to make his voice encouraging, but succeeded only in sounding oily.

"Come from up around Concho way, by any chance?"

"Yeah," the stranger answered casually. Then to himself, "He's got me spotted, all right. I wish the light was better in here, 'case I got to shoot."

Burden poured another drink for the newcomer and for himself.

"Happen to know a man name of Watruss up there?"

Again the stranger's gray eyes surveyed Burden.

"Yeah, I know a man named Watruss."

He did know a man named Watruss in Concho. Watruss was bad medicine in any man's town, and anybody that had any truck with him was bad medicine, or was worth looking out for. The stranger wondered if this hombre was a friend of Watruss.

"Maybe," he concluded his thoughts, "he's aimin' to pay me for puttin' that bullet through Watruss' lung."

"My name's Burden. Watruss give yuh any message for me?"

The newcomer was inwardly amused. Imagine Watruss giving *him* a message for anybody! But evidently Burden was expecting a messenger from Watruss, and mistook him for that messenger.

"Watruss don't put things in writin'," he ventured. "Was yuh expectin' him to?"

"Well, hardly," Burden admitted. "But as long as he sent you, I reckon yuh can do the job. He tell yuh what it was?"

"I reckon he figured you'd rather tell me in private," the stranger answered. To himself he said, "Looks like I'm gettin' into somethin'."

"Yeah," Burden admitted. "Watruss is smart. Let's you and me step back into this private room here and have a little talk."

IN THE small room off the barroom they sat down, and Burden got down to business without wasting any words.

"It's like this. Feller named Pound's got a place next to mine, and he's gettin' his lass-rope all tangled up in my business."

"Mean he's stealin' from yuh?"

"Wouldn't be surprised, but what I meant was he's moved in too close to me and interferin' with me."

"How?"

"He's a farmer, and he's fencin' in a lot of land he claims he bought from the state. That land used to be free range, and it happens the creek where I get my water runs through it. I reckoned I'd always have use of it, but with his fences, I ain't got enough water. Fact is, I just cain't afford to have that creek fenced, and he's done just that."

"Yuh checked up on his rights?"

"Yeah, and he's got me licked there—but I ain't licked yet. There's other ways—"

"I reckon I see what yuh mean," the stranger said. "Why don't yuh go over some night and say 'boo' to him, and maybe he'll run away?"

"That's the trouble. He ain't just a little two-bit squatter. He's bought up five hundred acres. He's puttin' in wheat and hay, and he's raisin' work

horses. He's got a real outfit there, and I done went over and said 'boo' to him—but he don't scare worth a damn. What he needs is to have somethin' right serious happen to him so he won't never get well. I got an idea I could buy that place from his *widow* right cheap."

"I see," the stranger said. "Yuh're hiring me to kill this feller Pound."

"Well, yuh don't have to put it so blunt," Burden said.

"I guess I'm a direct kind of hombre," the stranger answered. "Now, about the pay."

"I told Watruss it was a thousand—"

"This man's too important for that kind of money. Two thousand. A thousand now and the rest when the job's done."

"That's kinda steep—"

"Maybe yuh'd rather drop it."

Burden looked keenly at the stranger and knew that he could not bluff him. He dug into his hip pocket and came out with an old wallet, from which he counted out a large stack of bills.

"I'm countin' on yuh," he warned. "On Watruss' recommendation."

The stranger pocketed the money.

"Sure, yuh can count on anything Watruss tells yuh. I'll see yuh later."

As the stranger went out, not stopping at the bar, Burden rejoined his men.

"Well, I reckon Pound won't be botherin' us long," he grinned. "I got a hunch he's gonna have a long sick spell and not git well."

One of his men, who had just come to the table while Burden was closeted with the stranger, looked at his boss. Nodding toward the door through which the stranger had left, he asked:

"That feller yuh was with—he's the one that's gonna take care of Pound for yuh?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if he had somethin' to do with Pound's passin'. If he hasn't—then he's likely to git purty sick hisself."

"Know him?"

Burden looked at his rider.

"Why, he's a friend of a feller named Watruss up at Concho. Watruss wouldn'ta recommended him if he wasn't all right. How come yuh askin'?"

"I just happen to know that feller from when I worked up at Concho. And Watruss didn't send him because Watruss hates his guts! That feller is named Bryan Cole—and he's a Ranger!"

THE man whom Burden's rider had identified as Bryan Cole rode away from the saloon, stopping at the livery stable to find out the location of Pound's place.

"Lige Pound lives ten miles out on the Valley road. Can't miss his place," the livery man informed him. "Big red barn on the left. But stranger, I wouldn't be droppin' in on him this time of night, less'n he's expectin' yuh."

"No? How come?"

"I reckon Lige is gettin' touchy in his trigger finger. 'Course, tain't none of my business—"

"No. Well, thanks a lot."

Cole rode with an easy pace in the direction of the Pound farm, and in the darkness there was a cold smile on his face. He was picturing what Burden was going to look like when the hombre Watruss was sending to him showed up and Burden learned that he'd been talking to a man who was a deadly enemy of Watruss and anybody who hung out with Watruss. Cole speculated as to who Watruss would send out to do this gunning job. He decided it probably would be Crush Ketchum.

He hoped it would be Crush, for several reasons. Crush was the fastest thing in Concho with a gun. Besides which, the Rangers had never been able to get enough evidence on him to put him away for keeps. Crush had done plenty of job-work killings, admittedly, but he had a way of appear-

ing in the right and keeping his neck free of a halter.

It had even got around to Cole's ears that Crush had boasted he only wished he had a reason for tangling with Cole, because he thought Cole's reputation was a lot of hot air.

Yes, Cole decided, he hoped it would be Crush Ketchum.

Lige Pound's farm loomed up in the darkness—a gaunt shadow of a tall silo beside a great hip-roofed barn, a series of mushroom-like haystacks, small feed buildings, and the house, with a light shining dim and yellow through the front window.

Cole pulled up to within a safe distance of the front porch. He saw a yellow knife of light as the front door opened an inch, and stopped his horse. He knew somebody was behind that door and had heard his animal's hoofbeats. He knew as well as if he had seen it that the person had a gun, and would use it. There was enough light for the silhouette of his horse and himself to make a fair target.

"Hello," he yelled, leaning forward in his saddle.

He felt his nerves grow taut. Would a bullet answer his hail?

A thin voice answered from the house.

"What do yuh want?"

It sounded like the voice of a boy.

"Like to have a talk with a feller named Pound."

"He ain't seein' nobody," came back the voice. "Yuh better go on if yuh ain't lookin' for trouble."

"I gotta see Pound," Cole answered. "Lissen here. I'm goin' to git off my horse and walk up to the house—"

"No, yuh ain't—less'n yuh want a bullet—"

"I said I'm gonna see Lige Pound. I'm comin' in—with my hands in the air. Yuh kin keep that gun on me all the time—but don't shoot unless I drop my hands. Kick the door open."

There was something about the calm command in his voice that caused the owner of the voice behind the door to obey. Cole saw the yellow-lighted square was empty of any figure behind it, but he knew that he was covered just the same. He dismounted and walked toward the door, stepping into the lighted room with his hands still carefully raised.

AS HIS eyes grew accustomed to the light he saw a youth of perhaps fifteen, barefoot and clad in overalls. The boy held an old double-barreled shotgun in his hands, his right finger on the trigger and his thumb on the hammer. Cole thought how simple it would be for a gunman to kill him before he could get the hammer back. The boy just didn't know anything about speed in gun action or he would have had the hammer back already.

Then Cole saw an old man lying on a couch in the corner. The man's gray hair was bloody and there was blood on his face. His right arm hung limp to the floor, and was so swollen that it filled the sleeve of his shirt tightly. There was no movement from the man.

"That Lige Pound?" Cole asked. "What's the matter with him?"

The boy was sullen and suspicious. Without lowering the gun, he answered:

"If it's any of yore business, a horse kicked him."

Cole took a step toward the couch, but brought up short at a command.

"Don't yuh take one step more toward him, mister."

Almost unconsciously Cole had started lowering his hands, but he stopped and elevated them again.

"Why haven't you done something about him?" he demanded. "Who brought him in here?"

"I did," the boy said defiantly, "but I ain't gonna go away and leave him. He'll come to pretty soon."

"You fool," Cole snapped. "His arm's broken and it's gotta be set quick. Better while he's still unconscious. Get me some pieces of cloth,

an old sheet or something. Quick."

The youth did not move.

"No, yuh don't, mister. I ain't leavin' yuh out of my sight with him."

Cole turned to the boy.

"Here, take my gun out of its holster and be quick about it. Then maybe yuh'll git some sense. I want to fix him up. He yore dad?"

"Yeah," the boy answered.

"Then come on, take this gun of mine so I can git to work."

The boy was unconvinced. He studied Cole suspiciously.

"You one of Burden's men?"

"No."

"Then yuh're the man Burden sent for to kill Dad. We know all about it."

"Do you? Well, I ain't neither one of his men nor the one he sent for. Now, take my gun like I tell yuh."

The old man on the couch moved restlessly and groaned, and the youth looked at him anxiously. His mouth was drawn into a thin line with his suffering and uncertainty. Then he looked back at Cole a moment.

"All right," he said. "Dad needs help, but if yuh make one move—"

"Git them rags," Cole commanded as the boy came up cautiously and relieved him of his gun.

A silent, tense half hour settled over the room as Cole worked over the man. The arm was broken above the elbow. Cole broke up a kitchen woodbox to make splints, bound it up, setting the crushed bone as straight as possible, while the boy gave such help as he could. After awhile, the old man was able to talk.

"What happened to yuh?" Cole asked.

"My feed barn burned down and I had a mare in it I was expectin' to foal tonight. I tried to git her out, her bein' a pedigreed and valuable brood mare. Naturally she fought back, like any hoss will when you try to get 'em out of their stalls in a fire, and this is what happened. It's just

(Continued on page 107)

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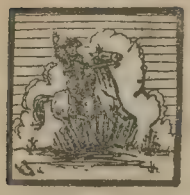

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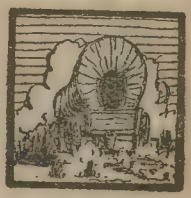

WHEN I was a small button going to school, the two studies I was worst at was history and geography. I recollect once asking my youngish lady teacher if she ever met up with Captain John Smith and Minnehaha. And I thought the highest point in the United States was the door to our barn loft, which I jumped out of with an umbrella for a parachute.

Well, hombres and hombresses, maybe you haven't got a map of the United States printed inside your heads either. But there's a flock of folks who ain't got an encyclopedia for a gizzard either.

Funny Questions

The other day I asked a National Park Service Ranger what was the funniest question a tourist ever asked him.

He said:

"I'll tell you the two funniest questions and you take your pick. The first was when a little old lady stood looking at the world's biggest hole in the ground and inquires:

" 'Mister Ranger, where is the park?'

" 'All of this,' I informs her, 'is Grand Canyon National Park.'

" 'I know,' she says patiently, 'but where is the *park?*'

"I nearly tumbled over the rim as I grabbed thin air for an answer. But after some polite questioning I found out that she thought a park had to be a place where there was a lawn and flowers planted."

"And what was Funny Question Number Two?" I asked him.

"It came from a tourist at Boulder Dam. He up and asked:

" 'Ranger, if all the water back of this dam was laid end to end, how far would it reach?' "

I asked the Ranger what he did.

"That time I did fall in. I sank and never did come up," he told me.

The Boulder Dam

Well, hombres and hombresses, at our last get-together here in POPULAR WESTERN Magazine, I promised to tell you some more about the fascinating Boulder Dam country.

And right here I got to ask you to blot up some history and geography. Only I guarantee it'll be a plumb painless lesson.

To start with, let's consider that vast series of desert basins which lie between the Rockies and the Pacific Coast ranges. This is called the Inter-Mountain region. It reaches up out of western Mexico, across Arizona and Nevada and eastern Oregon to Idaho; and on into Canada. It also includes Utah, parts of Montana, Idaho and the western watershed of Wyoming.

Up there in Wyoming, Colorado River starts its 1700-mile journey to the Gulf of California. For the last 565 miles, from Grand Canyon to the Gulf, it forms the boundary of Arizona and Nevada-California. And that stretch, folks, is what we're going to talk about now. Wild and undeveloped as most of it is, yet it is also the scene of mankind's greatest triumph over the mighty forces of Nature.

By that I don't mean just Boulder Dam, but various other flood control, irrigation and power projects it has made possible.

A Dangerous Stream

Until five-six years ago, the Colorado was a menace to anything man set his hand to do. In other regions, friendly rivers were safe highways, and had been since early days when they led pioneers into the wilderness.

But the Colorado, from its discovery by white explorers in 1540, through the four centuries until Boulder Dam was com-

pleted, was America's most dangerous stream. It sulked in deep canyons. It spread havoc and destruction in flood season. It petered down to a muddy trickle in dry weather, when its waters was most needed on crop lands.

The crying need for water in the thirsty West started men to dreaming of ways to harness the treacherous Colorado. One of the dreamers was a talented engineer—a man who not only was a leader in his profession, but also possessor of a friendly and persuasive character that helped him get along fine with politicians.

This man was Elwood Mead, chief of the Bureau of Reclamation, in our Department of the Interior.

So Mead came West, with a load of ambitious ideas and a field party to make a

survey of the river and to look for a dam-site. The party included surveyors, packers, geologists and last but not least, Old Tom, campcook.

Now right here at the outset the dream of Boulder Dam was mighty near shattered. Among the equipment sent from Washington was a big, heavy cooking range. That incumbrance presented the party with its first engineering problem.

They were making their look-see over about the roughest country in the Southwest. They had to break camp every few days. How to transport that gol-blamed cast-iron stove almost licked the Mead party.

Elwood Mead has gone on to his reward. His everlasting monument is the biggest man-made lake in the world, which bears his name. But Tom Mead, son of Elwood,

he told me that he remembers his father saying they never would o' rassled that stove along without the helpful cussing of Old Tom, the campcook.

Construction Began in 1931

So the survey was finished. In 1928 Congress approved the dam project. Construction began in 1931. In five years the job was finished. Now the lake is pretty well filled and the flow hums through tremendous generators that produce close onto two million horsepower of electric energy.

Mammoth steel towers carry the power lines in every direction from the Boulder power house. In less than fifty years, the dam will pay for itself and start yielding a handsome profit.

So the thing was a huge success. Nevermore would rich Imperial Valley be ruined by floods. But the Bureau of Reclamation wasn't satisfied yet. About 150 miles below Boulder Dam, a second bulwark was erected.

Parker Dam, this one is called. It backs up Lake Havasu, from which Los Angeles and other cities draw their main water supply. The water is pumped over desert mountains, in a giant pipeline, with the power created at Park Dam. A miracle had been performed.

The All-American Canal

Man was making a river flow uphill!

You'd think they'd o' stopped there. But no, they didn't. Down near Yuma another steel and concrete rampart grew. This one was named Imperial Dam. It furnished a steady year-round flow for the world's biggest irrigation ditch—the All-American Canal.

It went into action right recent. It

[*Turn Page*]

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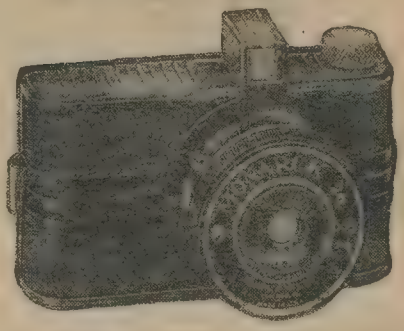

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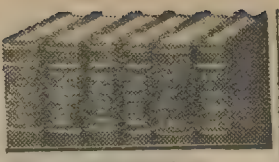

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irrigates one million acres, most of which was raw desert land not many months ago. The main canal is 80 miles long. Spurs reach for 130 miles. The most productive land in the world is supplied by this canal system. And Imperial Dam power lights the growing cities along it, and runs their canneries and refrigerating plants.

But the story, it isn't finished, folks! They've thought up more jobs for the old Colorado to do. Up above Lake Mead, at the towering lower portals of Grand Canyon, the State of Arizona has staked out another damsite. And between Boulder Dam and Parker Dam the guv'ment is surveying still another—Bull's Head damsite. And Laguna Dam, near Yuma. So the miracle grows. The Colorado, America's most destructive river, in a few years more will be the most useful river on earth!

Now let's look at this living lesson-book from another angle. Through a set of circumstances brought about millions of years ago, when the world was young, this lower Colorado basin was upheaved and twisted and painted by volcanic steam into amazing splendor. Here is the best the West can offer in mountain and desert.

A Great Playground

Here's where the National Park Service is taking hold. All around Lake Mead and on down is a vast recreational area, set aside as a game refuge and for public enjoyment forever. A new project is growing. Roads and camps, boat routes and air tours are being created.

In this invigorating and healthful climate the greatest playland on the continent is being made ready for us, and for the generations to come.

Uncle Sam hasn't passed up a bet. In Lake Mead and Lake Havasu there's year-round fishing. No closed season.. On a $2 license, a tourist can find lively sport with bass, crappie, perch, catfish and a big, fighting fish known as the Colorado River salmon.

The clear, cold river has been planted to rainbow trout, too. From 300,000 Utah fingerlings dumped in at intervals you can see 20-inch whoppers leaping right now!

If you aim to see the Boulder country, winter is the best season. I saw CCC boys, stripped to the waist and brown as Injuns, at work out there around Christmas time. In the summer the days are hell-hot, though the natives don't complain. Anyhow, nearly all buildings and homes in the desert country have cooling systems nowadays.

Suppose you're heading West, Home Corralers, to see all this. I'm going to tell you how you can make a pasear over the whole stretch, taking as much time as you're of a mind to.

If you start in the fall, Highway 66 is the way. There is also Route 91, which follows the old Arrowhead Trail down from Salt Lake City. Both'll bring you to Boulder Dam, where the highway crosses the dam.

Five miles from the dam is Boulder

City, which offers all accommodations for travelers by air, rail or highway. Boulder is a pretty little town, with handsome buildings, neat homes, and refreshing green lawns and trees. But on less than 300 miles from the dam is Las Vegas, the one grown-up town in southern Nevada. It's a mining and ranch center. A good share of the folks you see on the street wear high-heeled boots and gallon hats.

Las Vegas is a wide-open town. Bright-lighted halls of chance line the main street.

Here's a picturesque and genuine sample of the old West that's disappeared from so many other parts. All through Nevada gambling is in the open. Nevada gets most of her taxes from gambling layouts.

They'll tell you that they're not fly-by-night sucker joints either. In Nevada you get a square deal. If you win, you collect All you buck is the house percentage.

Anyhow, that's how it is. Nevada folks are proud that they've got more liberty per square mile than any place else on earth. And if you happen to hit the place in a hot spell, less than an hour away on fine, all-paved highway is a public park on top of Charleston Peak. Deer, elk, bighorns, big pines, spring water and winter snow sports.

But now for that tour along the Colorado. On the highway between Boulder City and Las Vegas, a new paved route takes you down through the gold town of Searchlight to Needles. From Needles to Parker, then Blythe. In all, 210 miles.

You're in Indian country and you see prospectors and pack burros and hear whoppers about fabulously rich lost mines.

Not All Whoppers

They're not all whoppers, though. While I was on the prowl, picking up pretty rocks, an old desert rat uncovered a gold deposit and sent a sample to the Nevada Bureau of Mines.

It assayed $33,000 to the ton!

South from Blythe a road gallops off for Yuma. It's about 80 miles. It's only partly improved as yet. You'll find, soon as you leave the pavement, that folks seem more friendly. The farther you go into the outlands, the more sociable they are, although few and far between. On this Blythe-Yuma stretch, after winter rains, the desert is a paradise of wild flowers.

Lots of Elbow Room

This whole Boulderland you'll see on such a trip. And you'll find lots of elbow room everywhere. Just, for instance, on

[*Turn Page*]

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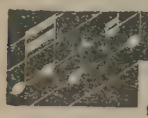

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the 40-mile stretch from Boulder City to Searchlight you won't sight a single habitation, not even a gas station. Under normal travel conditions, you'll meet about six automobiles per hour.

The black ribbon of highway stretches off, mile upon mile without a bend, across a dry lake bottom with a shimmery mirage that looks like the highway is under water. With now and then a road sign, "Look Out for Cattle, Open Range."

Mebbeso we'll meet up out yonder, Home Corralers. But if that pleasure ain't in the cards for me always, I feel mighty proud when folks write in, like one of you did few days back, and say:

"Keep up the good work, Doc! I know that country, and when I picked up POPULAR WESTERN magazine, I saw right off that you do, too!"

—OLD DOC TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WELL, folks, sure hope you enjoyed Old Doc Trail's chatter. I certainly did, myownself, and I hope you keep writing and asking him about all the things you want to know pertainin' to the West. Just shoot your letters along care of The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.

Now gather closer while I make some mighty important announcements. The next issue of POPULAR WESTERN will be a humdinger from the first page to the last—featuring a triple-star bill of novelets sure to deliver two-fisted, quick-trigger thrills. The headlined novelet will bring you Buffalo Billy Bates in some of the most breath-taking exploits of his career—read IN OLD ARIZONA, by Scott Carleton, for exciting battles in which Buffalo Billy faces the Apache Kid, Curly Bill and the worst gang of outlaws in the tough town of Tombstone.

Of course Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts will be back in another swell Painted Post thriller—OUTLAW RANCH, a novelet by Tom Gunn, in which there's a mysterious jailbreak that Steele is called upon to solve.

And—SENOR BAD MAN RIDES, by William L. Hopson, a grand novelet of real action thrills, packed with surprises, plus many shorter yarns will make the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN one of the best you ever read. So be on hand, everybody—and remember, pards, you're all welcome to use the coupon below and join the club. It's fun to belong and there are no dues or fees. So long, everybody—and thanks for listening!

—THE EDITOR.

OLD DOC TRAIL
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(Continued from page 101)

some more of that Burden's mischief."

"I just heard about it," Cole answered. "I was talkin' to Burden himself, matter of fact, and he made a deal with me to help him."

The old man lying on the couch looked at the visitor through pained eyes that suddenly lighted with hatred.

"So yuh come to do a job for Burden, did yuh? How much did he offer yuh to kill me?"

"He offered me a thousand—"

"Then why don't yuh git busy, seein's I'm flat on my back? How come yuh patched me up first, yuh sidewinder?"

That cool smile wrinkled Cole's eyes.

"I just wanted to be sure I was makin' the best deal possible. Wondered if yuh wanted to beat his price. I'm pretty handy with a gun, if I do say it myself."

THERE was contempt in the old man's face as he replied.

"Yuh might jest as well git on with yore job for Burden. I never in my life paid a man to fight my battles for me and I ain't startin' now. I'm a horse-breeder, not a trouble-maker, and I don't pay nobody to go takin' shots at my neighbors."

"Even when they're puttin' a price on yore head?"

"Not even then. I'll defend myself and my property, but I ain't goin' around doin' no killin', nor payin' anybody else to do it. So yuh can just git on with yore job, mister."

"I see," Cole answered. "And I kinda reckoned it would be that way. But yuh're kinda in a tough spot, you all broken up like this, and Burden puttin' a price on yore head."

"Yeah, but I got a clear conscience, and he ain't."

"Yuh heard Burden was going to get somebody to take care of yuh?"

[*Turn Page*]

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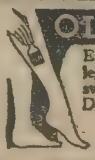

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"Sure, the livery man told me."

"And still yuh won't hire a man that's good with a gun?"

The old man tried to raise himself up on his elbow, but fell back on the couch.

"Listen here, young feller. Them that lives by the gun dies the same way. I never lived that way and I'm too old to start. Now, I'm much obliged to yuh for patchin' me up, but since yuh're finished, yuh can do what yuh got to do for Burden, or else git to hell out! I don't want no truck with you."

"Well," Cole answered with a faint grin, "it looks like I'm gonna have to do yore gunnin' for yuh for nothing."

"Yuh ain't doin' no—"

"Wait a minute, mister. I reckon I forgot to introduce myself. I'm a Ranger, name of Bryan Cole. We heard about this trouble down here, so I come down to try to find out what it was all about. I think both you and Burden, in yore different ways, showed me just about what the cause of it was."

"I didn't send for no Ranger."

"Nope, the neighbors did, particularly your friend, the livery man. Yuh see, everybody thought yuh was right, but was afraid to buck Burden, so they sent for me on the sly. At the same time, Burden sent for a gunman, but he made the mistake of thinking I was the man he ordered. He told me he wanted you killed."

"The dirty—"

"But the important thing is, the man he sent for will probably be along by now, and when Burden finds out that he's been fooled, he's going to get busy in a hurry trying to cover up. That's why I think yuh need me pretty bad right now."

"If I was only up—" the old man said.

"It's just as well yuh're not," Cole answered. "I came down here expecting to maybe arrest both you and Burden, but it turns out I'm gonna have to join forces with yuh. If I ain't mistaken I hear some visitors comin' up

the lane, and I got an idea they're here to put a finish to you and me, too."

He turned to the boy.

"You 'bout ready to give me my gun back now?"

The boy had gone to the door and was listening.

"Yuh mean yuh're goin' to help me and Dad?" he asked unbelievingly. "Without pay?"

"Sure, kid. I ain't a paid gunman. I was just checkin' up on yore dad to see if he was as bad as the man that's fightin' him. And I found out he wasn't. Now, if yuh've got any extra shells for that shotgun, yuh better get 'em out and keep 'em handy. I want yuh to stay in this room with the light out, and don't let nobody come in as long as yuh got a shell left. I'm gonna slip outside and be a kind of reception committee for Burden and his friends, who seem to be paying us a sociable call."

COLE walked quickly through the kitchen and out the back door just as the boy blew the lamp out, leaving the place dark. He crossed the cleared space beside the house and found concealment in a clump of brush near the barn from which he could cover the front door.

And just in time, too, for the sound of hoofs was closer. There was no effort at silence on the part of the newcomers. They were riding at a gallop. In the almost complete darkness, Cole counted six horses that came to a sliding halt in front of the door.

Then he heard Burden's booming voice in a shout.

"Pound, you and that Ranger fellow yuh got with you might just as well come out now, 'cause we're here to get yuh. Are yuh comin' out like a man?"

There was no answer.

"All right, men, surround the house," Burden barked. And then without further waste of time he fired a shot through the door. "All right, we'll smoke yuh out, yuh gully-jumpin' coyote and yuh star-wearin' sneak!"

[*Turn page*]

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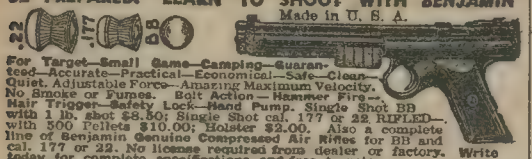

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Cole had to admit that Burden was sure a man of action.

Burden threw a shot through the window, and glass tinkled.

Then a hollow belch of flame came from the window as the youth's shotgun answered. A horse screamed and a rider cursed as the animal reared up on its hind legs and tumbled over backward, his paws threshing the ground in his death agony.

That shot was the signal for battle, and suddenly the night was cut by the sound of blazing guns. Cole saw men sneaking up to the window on his side of the building. Two more had disappeared behind the house.

Cole didn't want to reveal his presence outside, but there was no other way now, with the house surrounded. He took deliberate aim at one of the men at the window and triggered his weapon. The man yelled and fell to the ground.

But the flash of his gun had revealed his position. Burden shouted and threw two shots at him.

"Over in them bushes, men," he yelled. "Give it to the sneakin' devils!"

Cole answered him with a shot and Burden's horse fell dead under him. Burden scrambled to his feet, cursing.

Now the boy in the house was using his shotgun with steady action. Two shots came in swift succession, followed by a moment for reloading, and then two more shots.

But Cole had little time to concern himself with the boy. He saw out of the corner of his eye that the youngster had suddenly thrown the door open and was coming out with a six-gun blazing. Probably his father's weapon. Then Cole gave his whole attention to Burden and the other two men who were converging upon him, responding to Burden's cursing demands that he be killed.

"It's that damned Ranger man," Burden yelled. "And I told him enough to hang us all. Shut his mouth with lead!"

The three shadows came crouching

on tiptoes toward the bush which concealed Cole, their guns pumping lead into the shrubbery. Cole answered with slow, methodical care, jumping to a new position the moment the orange flash from his gun revealed his position.

He was in a tough spot and his antagonists were making it still hotter, for they came on squarely and unflinchingly in the face of his bullets, returning three for every one Cole fired.

IN THE darkness, Cole stopped to reload. There was a cold grin around his mouth.

"Well, here goes nothing," he said to himself. "It looks like the man who calls himself Bryan Cole, the Ranger, has come to his trail's end. And as the result of trying to do a man a good turn for the first time in my life. Well —that's that."

Cole flung himself out of his concealment with one leap and a yell, and his first shot cut down one of the three men approaching him. He felt a slug of lead tear at him somewhere in his chest, but he didn't stop.

He singled out Burden by his massive size, and shouted at him:

"Yuh got this comin' to yuh, Burden, for talking to the wrong man! I wouldn't have been here, but for you."

Burden recognized his voice, cursed and shot at the same breath. Burden's bullet hit Cole somewhere in the vitals, and Cole's bullet knocked Burden back to the ground and killed him instantly.

There was only one man facing him, and that man was coming on from his left at a steady pace, not giving one inch of ground. Cole peered at him through the darkness.

"That you, Ketchum?"

"Yes, this is Ketchum," the man answered, stopping poised for a moment. "You the hombre that calls himself Bryan Cole, claimin' to be a Ranger whenever it suits you?"

"That's me, Crush, and I been hear-

[*Turn page*]

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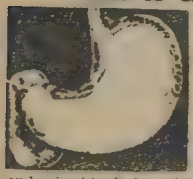

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in' around that yuh'd like to tangle with me, but didn't like the idea of killing a Ranger. That right?"

"All except that I'd just as soon kill a Ranger as anybody else. I been honin' to see what yore lead-slinging was like."

"All right, Ketchum, yuh got the chance, and yuh won't be killin' no Ranger. That's just a story I used once in awhile when it came in handy. Let's see what yuh got in yore gun, or do yuh want to pouch 'em and then draw?"

"What's the matter?" Ketchum taunted. "'Fraid? Let's step right up toe to toe with our guns in their pouches, then shoot. That's a good way to see whether yuh got guts or not."

There was a cool laugh in Cole's voice.

"Step right up, hombre. I didn't think yuh had it in yuh. We got a chance to rid this country of a couple of polecats at one time."

Cole tried to walk steadily toward his enemy, but the two bullet holes in his body were there for business, and his innards were on fire. His head was dizzy and reeling, but he forced himself to keep walking toward his enemy. They met at the entrance to the barn.

As they stood face to face Cole said:

"I heard a lot about yuh, Ketchum. Glad to see yuh good before I kill yuh."

"Same to you, hombre. Yuh got guts, looks like, feller, and maybe I'da changed my opinion of yuh, if yuh hadn't tried to horn in on this job of mine."

"I didn't horn in—I was pushed in," Cole answered. "Burden mistook me for you. But that's past. I met a *man* tonight, a crippled-up old man—but a *man!* So, for once, I'm fightin' for a man that's not payin' me for it. What's holdin' yuh back, feller? Grab yore iron!"

At the sound of four rapid shots

and then silence, the young Pound boy ran around the house, his pistol still smoking. He had killed the last of the invading gang.

Now he rounded the corner just in time to see two men, not three feet apart, pumping lead into each other as each sank to the ground. He stopped, his mouth open.

He saw the two figures lie still after the last shot was fired, and then there was silence. He went into the house, and sat with loaded pistol inside the open door until daylight.

A man rode up at daylight and there was a star on his belt.

"My name's Cole," he said. "Bryan Cole. Heard you were having some trouble."

The boy looked puzzled. The Ranger followed him as he led the way to the place where he had seen the duel in the darkness.

"This man said he was a Ranger named Bryan Cole," the boy said.

The Ranger looked down on the dead body of a man who resembled him as closely as if he had been his twin brother. It wasn't strange because the dead gunman *was* his twin brother. The real Bryan Cole thought of the long, twisted trail his brother had taken since they had been separated. But he decided it would do no good to explain to the boy.

"He one of the men who was trying to kill you and yore dad off?"

"No, sir," the boy answered. "He come to help us. If it hadn't been for him, with Paw crippled up, Burden would probably have killed Paw and me and burned the place like he threatened. This feller got killed protectin' us. Yuh know him?"

"I thought I did," the Ranger answered. "But I reckon, son, there's some things we got to be satisfied never knowin'. One of 'em is that no man really knows any other man—even his own brother. Now gimme a hand. . . ."

Next Issue—

SENOR BAD MAN RIDES

A Novelet by WILLIAM L. HOPSON

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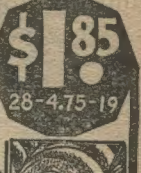

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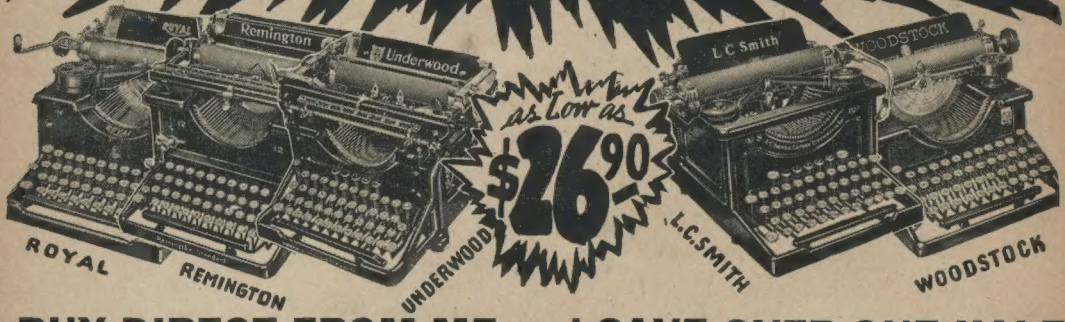

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